# The Parasite Machine

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# The Reckoning

For centuries the world had worn a mask called government. It spoke of protection, order, and the common good, yet beneath the mask lived something older and simpler: a machine built to take from the many and give to the few. Taxes were not contributions; they were tribute demanded at the point of a gun. Laws were not agreements; they were rules written by those who never planted, never built, never bled for the land they claimed to rule. Police and soldiers were not guardians; they were the armed collectors who ensured the machine kept turning. By the early years of the twenty-first century the mask had slipped so far that even children could see the teeth behind it.

Cities swelled with people who owned nothing and worked until their bodies broke. Debt followed every birth like a shadow. Inflation quietly stole what wages pretended to give. The rich lived in towers that touched the clouds while families below counted coins for bread. Leaked documents, passed hand to hand or whispered across dying networks, showed the same names appearing again and again: intelligence agencies feeding corporations, corporations feeding politicians, politicians feeding the agencies. The pattern was not corruption. It was the system working exactly as designed.

Then a book appeared that refused to lie.

Marek Solin, born in 1978, had watched the machine his whole life. In clear, cold sentences he named it: “The Parasite Machine”. The state, he wrote, was not a flawed tool that could be repaired. It was a criminal enterprise that existed only by consuming the labor and wealth of those who produced. It could not be voted better. It could not be reformed. It had to be ended. Copies spread faster than any authority could burn them. People read by candlelight in basements, under bridges, in the backs of trucks. The words did not create anger; they simply gave shape to the anger already burning in millions of hearts.

The year 2047 brought the breaking point. Economic collapse struck like a final winter. Food lines stretched for blocks. Savings vanished overnight. In that same season the last great leaks poured out—proof that the richest families, the security services, and the political class had been one single organism all along. Across continents, without signal or order, people moved at once. Historians would later call it The Silent Wave,

because no leader called it into being and no flag flew above it. It was simply millions of ordinary men and women who had reached the same conclusion on the same day: the machine had to die.

In every city and every province the local faces of the parasite were dragged into the light. Bankers who had foreclosed on farms, politicians who had signed the orders, corporate directors who had poisoned rivers for profit, high officials who had lived on stolen labor—these were the concrete targets. Some fled into the glass towers they had built. Others tried to rally their private guards. Neither worked for long. Communities that had once been kept divided now acted together. They judged in public squares, in village halls, on the steps of ruined capitols. Many of the guilty were executed. Some were spared only when they renounced every claim to power and walked away with nothing. The old enforcers—police and soldiers—faced the same choice the rest of humanity had faced: join the living or fall with the machine. Most chose life.

For two years the Great Reckoning rolled across the earth. Governments that had seemed eternal dissolved in weeks once their armed servants stopped obeying. Prisons emptied of those jailed for poverty or disobedience. Factories that had served only distant owners were stripped for parts or left to rust. The great cities, symbols of centralized control, became tombs. Millions simply walked out—carrying what they could, leading children by the hand—and never looked back. They did not want new leaders. They did not want new laws. They wanted soil under their feet and the right to keep what their hands grew.

By the autumn of 2049 the old order had no armies left to command and no money left to print. The world it had ruled was gone.

Marek Solin did not live to see the quiet years that followed. In 2051 a small band of survivors from the old elite tried to seize a region and declare themselves protectors. They murdered Solin in his sleep, believing his death would break the idea. Instead it turned him into something stronger than any living leader: a martyr whose words could not be killed. Lira Voss, the analyst who had risked everything to release the final documents, lived on but refused every offer of title or command. She traveled quietly, reminding anyone who would listen that the only safe power was the power no one person held. The Silent Wave itself remained faceless. That was its final and greatest strength.

When the killing stopped, the survivors did not build new capitals or write new constitutions. They walked into the empty lands and claimed what they could work. Every family, every small group, took a plot of ground. They grew food, raised animals, built shelters with their own hands. The rule that emerged was spoken in every language and carved into every memory: *No state. No organization. No elites.* It was not a suggestion. It was the single condition of continued life. Any attempt to create a council with binding power, any man who tried to speak for others, any family that began to hoard more land than it could tend—such things were answered the same way the old elites had been answered. The surrounding communities gathered, judged in the open, and ended the threat before it could grow roots. The stories of those endings were carried by traveling merchants and told at every seasonal gathering so that children would learn the cost of forgetting.

Thirty-four years have passed since the last government fell. It is now the year 2081. The great cities stand empty, their towers slowly returning to the earth. Vines climb through broken windows. Deer bed down in what were once boardrooms. No one mourns them. The people who remain live in small clusters—twenty families here, fifty there—scattered across the countryside like seeds that finally found good soil. Each household grows most of what it eats. Surpluses travel by cart or by river to the next valley. Traveling merchants carry tools, cloth, medicines, and news. Radio sets crackle with voices from distant villages. Letters move slowly and arrive safely. There are no taxes, no landlords, no wages paid to strangers, no one who can order another to kneel.

Life follows the seasons. Planting is hard. Harvest is harder. Winter is quiet and warm beside wood stoves. Children learn to read from old books preserved by those who remember. They also learn the names of the executed tyrants and the reasons why those names must never be spoken with respect. Elders give advice but issue no commands. Disputes are settled by talk or by walking away. When real danger appears—an armed band from the ruins, a trader grown too greedy, a young man dreaming of councils—the response is swift, public, and final. The bodies or the warnings are left where travelers will see them, and the story is added to the long chain of cautionary tales.

This is the world Elias Thorn was born into and has never left. He was a boy when the last stories of the Reckoning were still fresh on every tongue. He became a man in villages that measured safety not by the strength of their walls but by the absence of anyone who claimed the right to rule. He knows the old world only through the

warnings his parents and grandparents carried. He has seen, with his own eyes, what happens when someone forgets why the rule exists.

The land is quiet now. The machine is broken. But the memory of its teeth remains sharp, and the people who live free keep that memory alive on purpose. Because freedom, they have learned, is not a gift that stays once it is won. It is a harvest that must be tended every season, or the parasites will return.

The heart of Marek Solin’s book, the section that ordinary people copied by hand and read aloud in kitchens and workshops, was his direct comparison of the modern state to a criminal enterprise. He did not speak in the language of scholars. He spoke plainly, so that anyone who had ever paid a tax bill or watched their wages shrink could understand.

Throughout history, Solin wrote, states have never been neutral protectors. They have always been self-serving organizations that take wealth and labor from the great majority and move it upward into the hands of a small ruling group. Modern states, he argued, function exactly like sophisticated criminal syndicates or mafia families—only on a vastly larger scale and with one decisive advantage: they have convinced almost everyone that their actions are legal and necessary.

The main business of any state, according to Solin, is systematic wealth extraction. Governments collect taxes under the open threat of violence; if you refuse, armed men come to your door. Inflation, created through central banks, works as a hidden tax that quietly steals the value of everyone’s savings and wages without anyone having to pass a new law. Military budgets swallow trillions that simply disappear into favored contractors and secret projects, with no real accounting. Large sums flow through NGOs and international aid programs, yet much of the money never reaches the people it claims to help; it vanishes into private networks of the already powerful. All of this, Solin said, is not waste or corruption. It is the machine operating exactly as it was built to operate—moving resources from those who produce to those who control.

To keep this extraction running, the state maintains a monopoly on what it calls “legitimate violence.” Police and military forces exist first and foremost to protect the existing order and the interests of those at the top. When ordinary people threaten that order from below, the force is deployed without hesitation. At the same time, the legal system itself is structured to favor the powerful. Laws are written by and for the

elite. The same action—taking property, for example—is treated as theft when done by a poor man and as legitimate business or taxation when done by those in authority. This creates a permanent two-tiered reality that Solin called the most honest proof of the system’s true nature.

Elections and democratic institutions, he continued, usually serve as theater rather than real control. Candidates are pre-selected or heavily filtered by donor interests and established power networks. Once in office, politicians are expected to deliver contracts, regulations, and favorable rules to their backers. The public is allowed to choose between two or three faces, but the real decisions remain in the hands of a small circle of political, financial, and bureaucratic interests that do not change when governments change.

Solin drew a clear line between overt and covert forms of state power. In openly authoritarian countries, control is exercised through direct censorship, surveillance, and visible repression. In Western-style systems the same functions are carried out more subtly—through media influence, legal pressure, financial leverage, and sophisticated propaganda. Both versions serve the identical purpose: preserving the power and wealth of a ruling minority while managing the compliance of the majority.

The legitimacy of the entire arrangement, Solin insisted, is manufactured. Symbols, titles, ceremonies, flags, anthems, and solemn speeches create the appearance of something ancient and necessary. Phrases such as “national interest,” “public good,” and “rule of law” are repeated until they feel like natural truths. Education and media reinforce the idea that the state is a benevolent and inevitable institution, making it difficult for people even to imagine living without it.

Attempts to reform the system from inside or to replace one form of state with another have always produced the same result, Solin observed. New ruling groups rise, adopt the same tools of extraction and control, and the machine continues. The problem is not bad leaders or the wrong ideology. The problem is concentrated coercive power itself—any institution that claims the right to take wealth by force and to punish those who resist.

In the final pages that spread most widely, Solin summarized the state in simple terms: it is an institution that claims to serve the people while primarily functioning to protect and expand the interests of those who control it. Through economic extraction, legal manipulation, narrative control, and the constant threat of force, it maintains a

system in which a small elite benefits at the direct expense of the broader population. This pattern, he wrote, has remained remarkably consistent across every political system and every century.

These ideas did not arrive as abstract theory. They arrived as recognition. Farmers who had lost land to tax debt, workers whose wages bought less every year, parents who watched their children drafted into distant wars—all read Solin's words and felt the machine being named for the first time. The book did not tell people what to do. It simply made it impossible for them to keep pretending they did not already know.

When the Reckoning came, it was these pages—passed from hand to hand, read by firelight, carried in pockets during the long walks out of the dying cities—that gave the uprising its clearest language. The people did not rise because a leader called them. They rose because, at last, they could see the parasite machine clearly and could no longer pretend it was anything else.

The words in Solin's book did not stay on the page. By the winter of 2047 they had become something more dangerous: a shared understanding that crossed borders and languages without any central command. Economic collapse had already stripped away the last illusions. Savings vanished overnight. Prices for bread, fuel, and medicine doubled in weeks while wages bought less every month. Families who had once believed the system could be fixed now saw only endless extraction with no end in sight. Leaked documents—thousands of pages showing the same names linking intelligence services, corporations, banks, and political offices—circulated alongside Solin's text. Together they removed any remaining doubt that the machine was real and that it had always been the enemy.

In city after city, province after province, and village after village, people moved at the same moment. There was no signal from above, no party headquarters issuing orders, no single leader giving the call to rise. The uprising was later named The Silent Wave because it had no face and no voice of command. It was simply millions of ordinary men and women acting on the same realization at the same time. In one place they surrounded government buildings and refused to let the old officials leave. In another they blocked the roads used by armored convoys carrying the last loyal forces. In the countryside they turned on the local officials, tax collectors, and enforcers who had carried out the daily work of the parasite for years. The targets were always the concrete faces of power: politicians who had signed the extraction laws, bankers who had foreclosed on homes and farms, corporate directors whose decisions had poisoned

rivers and land, and high officials who had lived comfortably on stolen labor while preaching sacrifice to everyone else.

The response was swift and completely decentralized. Communities that had been kept divided for generations now acted together without any formal structure. They identified those responsible, brought them into public squares, village halls, or the steps of empty capitols, and judged them openly in front of the people they had ruled. Many of the old elite were executed after these judgments. Others were stripped of everything they owned and sent away with nothing but the clothes on their backs. The police and military units that had once protected the system faced the same choice the rest of the population had already made: stand with the machine or stand with the living. People remembered that they are the army and police, most never gathered for the elites calls. Most chose the living.

For two full years the Great Reckoning rolled across the world. Governments that had seemed eternal collapsed once their armed servants stopped obeying. Prisons emptied of those jailed for poverty or disobedience. The great cities began to empty as well. Millions simply walked away from the concrete towers, the surveillance grids, and the systems that had ruled their lives. They carried tools, seeds, animals, and children, and they claimed plots of land in the open countryside where no one could issue orders or collect tribute. By the autumn of 2049 the old world order had no armies left willing to fight. It was finished.

## Vigilant Fields

The morning arrived without hurry. A pale band of sunlight spread across the fields, slowly lifting the silver mist that had settled over the meadows during the night. Dew clung to the long grass, each blade bending beneath tiny drops that flashed whenever the light reached them. Beyond the gently rolling fields stood scattered farmhouses built from timber and local stone, their red and dark green roofs rising among apple trees and old oaks. Thin columns of wood smoke drifted lazily upward from chimneys, carrying the scent of burning birch across the quiet valley. Somewhere farther away a rooster announced itself with determined confidence, answered a moment later by another from the opposite hillside. Cows wandered slowly through fenced pastures while a pair of horses pulled a small wagon toward the road, their harnesses jingling softly in the still morning air.

Outside a broad workshop whose walls combined weathered oak beams with carefully laid grey stone, Elias Thorn tightened another bolt on the side of a diesel generator older than he was. The machine rested on thick wooden blocks beneath a simple roof extension that protected it from rain, its faded green paint scratched by decades of honest work. Someone long ago had stenciled factory markings onto its steel housing, but most of the letters had disappeared beneath rust and countless repairs. New fuel lines gleamed beside cast-iron components that had survived two generations without complaint. Fresh gaskets, handmade from compressed fiber sheets, sat neatly beneath the cylinder head. The engine had become something different from what its original builders had imagined. It had passed through so many careful hands that every repair carried the fingerprint of another mechanic who had chosen patience over replacement.

Elias leaned forward, resting one gloved hand on the warm engine block while the other adjusted a brass injector fitting with a worn spanner polished smooth from years of use. Shoulder-length brown hair moved gently in the breeze around the thick black rubber strap that held his brass-and-steel goggles permanently against his forehead. He almost never removed them. The polished lenses reflected the morning light whenever he lifted his head, giving him the appearance of someone forever prepared to look into sparks, smoke, or blinding sunlight. His heavy black leather coat hung almost to his boots despite the warming day, patched here and there with carefully sewn pieces of darker leather that matched so well they appeared intentional rather than repaired. The coat carried the smell of engine oil, wood smoke, and years spent beside machines that had refused to die.

His canvas backpack rested nearby against the workshop wall. Several tools protruded from one side pocket beside a rolled-up wiring diagram enclosed in a waterproof tube. Strapped securely to the back of the pack rested an old double-barreled shotgun wrapped in waxed cloth against the morning moisture. A sturdy leather sheath holding a broad working knife hung beside it, while the holstered pistol at his belt remained almost forgotten beneath the folds of his coat. The weapons had accompanied him on many journeys, yet they looked less like instruments waiting for violence than tools one hoped never to need. Most days the knife opened crates, trimmed leather, scraped gaskets, or cut rope far more often than it left its sheath for any other purpose.

A small portable radio sat upon the workshop windowsill beside an enamel mug of steaming coffee. Its aluminum antenna extended nearly half a meter into the air, catching the morning broadcasts from somewhere beyond the eastern hills. The casing bore scratches around every corner, repaired once with riveted aluminum plates after falling from a wagon years before. Four rechargeable batteries hidden beneath the back panel powered it faithfully,

and Elias had long since learned how to rebuild the charging circuit whenever it began acting stubborn.

A cheerful voice crackled softly through the speaker between occasional bursts of static.

"Good morning to everyone listening across the Green River valleys. You're tuned to Valley Voice Radio, broadcasting from Birch Hollow. The weather today should remain clear until late afternoon, with gentle southern winds. Traders heading toward North Bridge may wish to cross before sunset. Rain is expected tomorrow."

The voice paused while the faint hiss of the airwaves filled the silence.

"Before today's music begins, we've received word from Willow Crossing that their woodworking fair opens this coming sixth day. Furniture makers, wheelwrights, and instrument builders are all expected. Visitors are welcome. Several merchants have already reserved places for books, cloth, leather goods, preserved foods, and software exchanges."

Elias smiled faintly without looking up from the engine.

"They'll have every carpenter within fifty kilometers arguing over oak again," he murmured.

He loosened another fitting before lifting the injector free. The nozzle carried a thin layer of carbon that he examined carefully against the sunlight.

"Still not spraying cleanly."

He carried it toward a sturdy oak workbench standing beneath the workshop awning. Rows of hand tools hung above the bench with careful precision. Open-ended spanners stood in ascending order. Screwdrivers rested in leather loops. Small drawers labeled in neat handwriting held bearings, springs, washers, electrical connectors, vacuum tubes, screws sorted by thread size, rubber seals, copper wire, and dozens of salvaged electronic components. Against one wall stood a compact metal lathe driven by its own electric motor, while beside it a milling machine waited beneath a canvas cover. Shelves overflowed with manuals whose spines carried names of engine manufacturers that had disappeared decades before the Reckoning. Between the books rested DVDs labeled in careful handwriting: Diesel Systems Archive, Electrical Diagnostics Collection, Mechanical Drawings Volume III, Workshop Software 2078 Edition, Farming Simulator 2080, Valley Accounting Suite, Radio Design Collection. Their printed labels had faded slightly, but every disc remained protected inside transparent cases.

The radio resumed.

"Today's repair bulletin comes from Copper Hill Engineering Cooperative—"

The announcer laughed softly.

"Cooperative in the old sense of neighbors helping neighbors, before anyone starts writing angry letters."

Elias chuckled.

"They never tire of making that joke."

The announcer continued.

"A reminder for anyone servicing Model Thirty-Nine irrigation pumps. Check the bronze impeller shaft before replacing the seals. Several mechanics have reported hairline fractures after last winter's freezing temperatures."

Elias nodded almost automatically.

"Good advice."

He reached for a magnifying lens, examining the injector more closely before setting it into a small ultrasonic cleaning bath powered by a humming electronic control unit assembled from parts far newer than the engine itself. Tiny ripples spread across the cleaning fluid as the machine began its work.

Beyond the workshop fence the valley stretched peacefully toward distant forests whose deep green crowns rolled over the hills like slow waves. Small farms dotted the landscape, each separated by hedgerows, orchards, gardens or grazing fields rather than walls. Smoke rose from blacksmith shops, pottery kilns and bakeries scattered throughout the surrounding countryside. Somewhere beyond the next ridge a sawmill had already begun its steady rhythm, while farther away the faint metallic tapping of a machine shop drifted across the still air whenever the breeze shifted.

A narrow gravel road wound through the valley, carrying quiet morning life instead of endless traffic. A farmer drove past on a restored diesel tractor pulling a wagon loaded with fresh vegetables destined for the weekly market. Two children pedaled bicycles behind him, laughing while a shepherd guided several dozen sheep across a nearby pasture. An elderly woman walked in the opposite direction with a basket of medicines slung carefully over one arm, exchanging a cheerful wave with everyone she met.

Nobody hurried.

No one watched a clock.

The work would be finished when hands had finished it.

The radio crackled once more.

"And finally, greetings from Meadow Ridge. Their new computer workshop has completed another educational collection for children learning mechanical drawing. Copies will be available through travelling merchants beginning next

month. Several local programmers have also finished a cooperative strategy game set during the rebuilding years. Early reports say it's difficult enough to keep even experienced players occupied."

Elias smiled again.

"I'll have to find that one."

He lifted the cleaned injector from the bath, held it toward the light, and nodded with quiet satisfaction. The tiny nozzle gleamed like new.

"That should do nicely."

He walked back toward the waiting generator while a gentle breeze stirred the long grass around the workshop, carrying with it the scent of pine forests, freshly cut hay, warm engine oil and distant bread baking somewhere beyond the quiet hills. The valley breathed with the unhurried confidence of people who built, repaired, traded, harvested and rested because they wished to—not because anyone standing above them demanded it. Here, every workshop, every field, every orchard and every home belonged to the hands that cared for them, and the morning unfolded with the simple certainty that another peaceful day had begun.

The repaired injector slid smoothly into its place beneath Elias' steady hands. He tightened the fuel line, checked each fastening once more, then stepped back and reached for the heavy crank mounted on the flywheel housing. The engine resisted during the first turn, its pistons compressing with the familiar reluctance of cold steel. On the second pull the flywheel gathered momentum. Elias adjusted the decompression lever, gave one firm swing, and the old diesel answered with a deep cough that echoed across the yard. A cloud of grey smoke drifted briefly from the exhaust before the engine settled into a calm, rhythmic beat. The entire machine seemed to exhale after years of dependable service and one more careful repair.

He listened for nearly a minute without touching anything. His eyes remained half closed behind the brass rims of his goggles as each sound separated itself in his mind. The injector clicked evenly. The governor responded cleanly. No metallic knocking came from the connecting rods. Even the fan bearings, which had complained faintly the previous evening, now turned with little more than a quiet hum.

"Much better," he said softly. "You'll outlive me yet."

The gravel road beyond the workshop filled with the slow creaking of wooden wheels. Elias looked up just as a broad wagon drawn by two chestnut horses rolled through the open gate. The driver, a thickset man with a neatly trimmed grey beard, climbed down while brushing dust from his canvas coat. The wagon carried a curious collection of machinery beneath waterproof tarps—an

irrigation pump, two electric motors, a damaged grain cleaner, several boxes of loose gears and a compact gasoline engine secured carefully with leather straps.

"Morning, Elias," the man called with a broad smile.

"Morning, Marcus. Busy again?"

Marcus laughed.

"I was hoping you'd say no."

"You know I never do."

"I know."

They shook hands warmly.

Marcus owned one of the larger grain mills several valleys to the west. Not larger because someone had granted him permission, nor because he employed hundreds of laborers, but simply because neighboring farming families had found it practical to bring their harvests there. The mill stood beside a fast-moving river whose current drove part of the machinery while generators supplied the remainder. Every autumn dozens of wagons gathered there, and by evening each family returned home with sacks of freshly milled flour and the coins they had earned selling surplus grain.

Marcus walked around the wagon, pulling back the first canvas cover.

"The irrigation pump started rattling yesterday."

He pointed toward the electric motors.

"One of these overheats after an hour."

Then he tapped the grain cleaner affectionately.

"And old Greta here finally decided she'd had enough."

Elias smiled.

"Machines choose inconvenient moments to grow old."

"They certainly do."

They rolled the irrigation pump onto a sturdy handcart together.

"I'll look at this first."

Marcus reached into his leather shoulder bag and produced a small cloth pouch tied with a braided cord.

"I've got payment."

Elias waved a hand.

"Let's see how much work it needs first."

"You always say that."

"And you're always impatient."

Marcus untied the pouch anyway. Inside lay neatly folded paper notes and several bright brass coins whose edges had become smooth from years of circulation.

"The harvest was good."

"I'm glad."

"So was the flour market. People have been buying more bread than ever."

"That's usually a healthy sign."

Marcus nodded.

"When people eat well, they smile more."

Elias chuckled.

"I've noticed the same."

No ledger appeared. No official receipt waited to be stamped. They both knew approximately what the work would cost because repair prices had remained remarkably stable for years. Workshops published their prices openly, and merchants carried updated lists whenever materials became more expensive or easier to obtain. Competition existed everywhere, yet arguments over payment remained uncommon. If one mechanic charged too much, people simply visited another whose craftsmanship they trusted equally.

While Elias loosened the pump housing, another bicycle rolled into the yard. A young woman in oil-stained overalls coasted to a stop beside the workshop, balancing an electric chainsaw motor inside a wicker basket fixed above the front wheel.

"Good morning."

"Morning," Elias replied.

She lifted the motor carefully.

"I think I burned the windings."

He accepted it and sniffed the faint smell of scorched insulation.

"You probably did."

She laughed.

"I figured as much."

"What were you cutting?"

"Oak."

"Wet?"

She looked slightly embarrassed.

"Freshly fallen."

"There it is."

She nodded.

"My father said you'd say exactly that."

"He's a sensible man."

She smiled.

"I'll tell him."

She introduced herself simply as Lina from Willow Crossing, where furniture makers, cabinet builders and musical instrument craftsmen filled nearly every workshop along the village streets. Their chairs and tables travelled across half the country aboard merchant wagons, recognizable by the carved oak leaves decorating every finished piece.

"If you can't repair it," Lina said, "I'll buy another."

Elias shook his head.

"No need."

"You have replacement wire?"

"I have copper."

"You wind motors yourself?"

"When necessary."

She looked genuinely impressed.

"I've only ever seen factory-made ones."

He glanced toward the shelves lining the workshop wall.

"Factories built plenty before the Reckoning. People build them now."

Marcus laughed behind them.

"And build them better half the time."

Lina nodded thoughtfully.

"My grandfather still says the old factories made everything."

"My grandfather said the opposite," Marcus replied. "He claimed the best things always came from people who cared enough to repair them."

Before the conversation could continue, another voice called from the road.

"Elias!"

A lean man pushed a motorcycle through the gate, its front suspension hanging awkwardly to one side.

"I need a miracle."

Elias looked at the bent fork.

"No."

The man sighed dramatically.

"I was afraid you'd say that."

"I said no miracle."

He grinned.

"A repair."

The rider laughed loudly.

"I'll settle for that."

His name was Viktor, a travelling courier who carried letters, engineering drawings, software collections stored on DVDs, books and occasionally replacement computer components between distant settlements. His modified motorcycle saved days compared with horse travel whenever roads remained passable.

"What happened?"

"Wild boar."

"The boar won?"

"For a moment."

Marcus folded his arms.

"You still ride too fast."

"I ride exactly fast enough."

"You've been saying that since you broke your collarbone."

"And I was right then too."

Everyone laughed.

Viktor removed a padded satchel from the rear luggage rack.

"I've got deliveries while you're working."

He opened the bag carefully.

"Three software packages from Iron Bridge."

He handed one to Lina.

"Your workshop ordered new furniture design software."

She accepted the case with delight.

"It's already finished?"

"They've added automatic cutting templates."

She turned the DVD over in her hands, smiling.

"My father will spend all winter playing with this."

Viktor nodded toward Elias.

"And I've brought your quarterly engineering archive."

He produced another disc inside a sturdy plastic case.

"Mechanical Review, Autumn Edition."

Elias examined the label.

"Anything interesting?"

"Several articles about improving fuel injectors."

Marcus burst into laughter.

"You've spent all morning repairing one."

"Then I'll enjoy reading about it tonight."

Viktor reached once more into the satchel.

"Oh—and someone from North Wind included a game."

He held up another DVD.

"'Railway Builder 2081.'"

Marcus grinned.

"You'll disappear for a week."

"I only play after work."

"So you claim."

"The machines would complain if I didn't repair them first."

The morning continued filling with visitors. Some arrived carrying broken radios wrapped carefully in blankets. Others brought sewing machines whose gears had finally worn smooth after decades of faithful service. A shepherd delivered a portable solar battery that no longer accepted charge. An elderly

teacher arrived with a worn laptop whose keyboard had begun failing after thousands of lessons. Elias accepted each machine with the same quiet attention, writing owners' names and brief notes into a thick leather-bound notebook resting beside the workbench.

Around him the workshop yard slowly transformed into a small gathering place. Fresh bread appeared from someone's basket. Coffee simmered over a portable stove. Children wandered curiously between wagons, watching engines being dismantled while older mechanics exchanged ideas about better bearings, improved lubricants, homemade computer programs and new milling techniques discovered in distant valleys.

Business never felt hurried. Work travelled from village to village just as naturally as books, seeds, medicines and songs. Coins changed hands because they remained convenient, not because anyone commanded their use. Every repaired engine would soon return to a field, a sawmill, a workshop or a home where it would help another family produce something useful in turn. The quiet rhythm of exchange carried no voices demanding tribute and no officials waiting to claim a share before honest work reached the people who had earned it. Here prosperity moved with the wagons along the dusty roads, stopping wherever skilled hands and willing neighbors met.

As the morning advanced, the small crowd gradually dispersed. Marcus drove his wagon toward the mill after leaving the irrigation pump and grain cleaner behind. Lina balanced the empty basket back onto her bicycle, promising to return in three days. Viktor drank the last of his coffee, slung the leather satchel over his shoulder once more, and disappeared down the gravel road with the familiar growl of his motorcycle fading into the hills. The workshop yard grew quiet again, disturbed only by the ticking of cooling engines and the gentle breeze rustling through the walnut tree standing beside the stone wall.

Elias looked over the machines now waiting patiently beneath the awning. Every one represented someone's livelihood, someone's comfort, or simply something useful that deserved another decade of life instead of being discarded. He rolled the irrigation pump farther inside before opening the broad double doors leading into the main workshop.

Cool air carrying the familiar scents of steel, machine oil, leather, fresh sawdust and warm electrical insulation greeted him immediately. Sunlight entered through high windows facing north, washing the room with an even white light that left almost no shadows across the workbenches. The ceiling rose nearly five meters overhead, supported by thick oak beams blackened slightly from years of welding smoke despite the ventilators mounted near the roof ridge. Steel hooks hung from overhead rails where chain hoists could lift engines weighing several hundred kilograms with slow, steady precision.

The workshop had not been built all at once. The original stone building dated from Elias' grandfather's time, little more than a modest blacksmith's forge and machine shed. Over the decades new sections had been added one after another whenever another craft demanded space. The oldest walls still carried hammer marks where stone had been shaped by hand, while newer sections blended timber framing with insulated brickwork produced by a nearby kiln. Nothing looked luxurious. Everything looked useful.

Against the western wall stood Elias' machine shop. A heavy precision lathe painted dark green occupied the place of honor, its polished bed gleaming under careful maintenance. Beside it stood a vertical milling machine equipped with both manual handwheels and a small computer controller Elias had installed himself years earlier. The controller allowed repetitive cutting jobs to be performed with remarkable accuracy, yet the machine remained simple enough to repair with ordinary tools should anything fail.

Nearby rested a compact drill press, surface grinder, hydraulic press, metal bandsaw and bench grinder whose wheels had been dressed so often they appeared almost perfectly symmetrical. Steel stock filled organized racks beside them: round bar, square stock, flat plate, brass rods, aluminum billets, stainless tubing and cast iron blocks waited patiently for future projects. Every piece carried handwritten measurements attached by wire tags.

Shelves stretched almost the full length of another wall. Dozens of drawers filled them from floor to ceiling, each bearing neat labels written in Elias' careful hand.

M6 Bolts.

M8 Stainless.

Bronze Bushings.

Needle Bearings.

Nothing appeared random. Elias could walk through the workshop in darkness and still find nearly every component by memory alone.

The electronics corner occupied one entire room separated by glass partitions to keep grinding dust away from delicate circuits. Two sturdy oak desks stood beneath bright adjustable lamps. Oscilloscopes, soldering stations, digital multimeters, power supplies, logic analyzers and microscopes filled the benches beside anti-static mats worn smooth from years of careful repairs. Coils of brightly colored wire hung neatly from rotating racks while bins overflowed with salvaged integrated circuits recovered from machines too badly damaged to save.

Against the far wall stood three desktop computers connected through a modest local network. They looked thoroughly modern despite their

mismatched cases assembled from whatever good parts had been available over the years. Wide flat-screen monitors displayed engineering drawings waiting to be finished. One machine specialized in mechanical design. Another stored thousands upon thousands of technical manuals scanned during the decades after the Reckoning. The third remained connected to workshop machinery, generating tool paths for milling operations or calculating tolerances whenever Elias designed replacement components no longer manufactured anywhere.

There was no connection to any worldwide network because no such network existed anymore. Everything important lived here, backed up carefully onto hard drives stored inside fireproof cabinets and duplicated onto optical discs. If another engineer wished to obtain the information, merchants carried copies from settlement to settlement just as they carried books or medicines.

Several tall bookcases occupied the eastern wall. Their shelves bent slightly beneath the weight of thick manuals whose covers bore names from a vanished age.

Internal Combustion Engines.

Industrial Electrical Systems.

Agricultural Machinery Maintenance.

Precision Bearings Handbook.

Hydraulic Engineering.

Radio Communications.

Materials Science.

Practical Welding.

Some discs contained practical software written by independent programmers living hundreds of kilometers away. Others carried educational programs, engineering databases, music collections, restored films, or games exchanged between settlements simply because people enjoyed creating them. Every disc had travelled from hand to hand before eventually finding its place upon Elias' shelves.

Near the entrance stood something almost every visitor noticed immediately: an enormous steel welding table scarred by decades of sparks. Above it hung Elias' welding equipment. A modern inverter welder rested beside an older transformer machine that still worked faithfully despite weighing nearly as much as a small motorcycle. Gas cylinders stood secured against the wall supplying MIG and TIG welding torches. An oxy-acetylene cutting rig occupied one corner, its brass valves polished from constant use. Protective helmets, leather aprons, thick gloves and dark welding curtains completed the area.

The concrete floor beneath bore countless tiny burn marks where glowing droplets of steel had landed over many years.

Near the rear doors another room served as the woodworking shop. A table saw, planer, jointer, band saw and wood lathe waited there, surrounded by carefully stacked walnut, oak, ash and pine drying slowly upon overhead racks. Elias rarely built furniture, but machine housings, handles, crates and replacement patterns often required skilled woodworking before steel could ever be machined.

The southern wall carried fewer tools but drew the eye more than any other part of the workshop. Old posters hung there inside simple wooden frames, their colors faded by decades of sunlight.

One showed the exploded drawing of a diesel engine produced sometime before the Revolution, every gear and bearing illustrated with remarkable precision.

Another displayed electrical symbols beneath the title *Think Before You Connect.*

A third depicted the internal workings of a steam locomotive whose elegant engineering still fascinated Elias despite railways now being rare.

Between the posters hung framed newspaper pages whose paper had yellowed with age. They were not valuable because collectors desired them. They remained because they marked moments that had changed the world forever.

One headline read:

THE FIRST REGIONAL GOVERNMENT COLLAPSES.

Another:

MILLIONS LEAVE THE CITIES.

Another simply declared:

THE RECKONING CONTINUES.

One photograph showed ordinary people dismantling a tax office whose stone walls had stood empty ever since. Another captured families walking out of a city carrying children, backpacks, seed sacks and tools beneath grey autumn skies. There were no victorious generals, no politicians waving from balconies, no flags raised over conquered buildings. Only people walking toward open country.

At the center hung the smallest frame of all.

Inside rested a carefully preserved newspaper clipping containing nothing but a black-and-white portrait of Marek Solin beside a short obituary printed after

his murder in 2051. Beneath the photograph someone had handwritten one sentence before placing it behind glass decades earlier.

*"Ideas that belong to everyone cannot be buried with one man."*

Elias paused there almost every morning without thinking about it consciously. He never saluted the photograph. Never spoke to it. Never treated it as something sacred. It simply reminded him why his workshop existed.

Not because someone had ordered it to.

Not because some distant office had granted permission.

Simply because people needed machines repaired, knowledge preserved, and useful things built.

He reached for a grease pencil hanging beside the workbench and quietly added another name to the growing list of jobs waiting for the coming days. Outside, through the open workshop doors, the peaceful sounds of the valley drifted gently inside—the distant rhythm of a sawmill, children's laughter somewhere along the road, the steady clatter of wagon wheels, and, faintly carried by the warm afternoon breeze, the crackling voice of another radio beginning its midday broadcast.

The afternoon settled gently over the valley. Sunlight poured through the open workshop doors, reaching across the concrete floor until it touched the legs of the welding table. Outside, the warmth had drawn the scent of pine resin from the surrounding forests, mingling with freshly cut hay drying in neat rows across nearby fields. Bees drifted lazily among flowering clover beside the gravel road while swallows darted overhead, turning sharply whenever insects rose from the grass. Somewhere in the distance someone was splitting firewood, each measured strike of the axe carrying across the still countryside.

Elias had just finished replacing the damaged windings inside Lina's chainsaw motor when he heard a familiar rhythm of hooves long before the wagon itself appeared.

He smiled without looking up.

"Jonas."

A minute later a sturdy pair of bay horses emerged around the bend, pulling one of the most recognizable merchant wagons in three valleys. Its broad wooden sides had been reinforced with riveted steel strips, while a curved canvas roof protected the cargo beneath from rain and dust. Small brass lanterns hung at each corner, polished until they reflected the afternoon sun.

Leather straps secured dozens of carefully packed crates whose handwritten labels peeked from beneath the canvas.

BOOKS.

MACHINE PARTS.

MEDICINES.

SEEDS.

TOOLS.

Two bicycles rested upside down upon the rear rack beside several spare wagon wheels and neatly coiled lengths of electrical cable. A collapsible radio antenna had been fastened along one side of the wagon, folded neatly against the wooden frame until needed.

Jonas guided the horses through the workshop gate before climbing down with the practiced ease of someone who had spent most of his life travelling dusty roads.

He was perhaps fifty years old, broad shouldered without being heavy, his weathered face permanently carrying the relaxed expression of a man who had seen enough of the world to stop hurrying through it. A long dust-colored coat reached nearly to his boots, covered with dozens of carefully sewn pockets of different sizes. Each held notebooks, maps, pencils, folded letters, receipts or small tools. On his head rested sunglasses whose dark lenses had become slightly scratched over the years. Fingerless gloves stained equally by grease and printer's ink covered his hands.

"Afternoon, Elias."

"Good afternoon."

Jonas removed his hat and hung it on the wagon rail.

"You've already gathered work."

"I usually do."

"I passed Marcus halfway home."

"He was pleased."

"That's never difficult after harvest."

They shook hands warmly before Jonas walked toward the rear of the wagon.

"I've got half your month packed back here."

"So I see."

The merchant loosened several leather straps before lifting the heavy canvas covering.

Inside, the wagon resembled a travelling warehouse.

Rows of carefully constructed wooden shelves filled the interior from floor to ceiling. Every item had been secured against movement by leather straps or sliding wooden bars. Nothing rattled despite hundreds of kilometers of uneven roads.

Jonas reached first for a canvas mailbag.

"Letters."

He placed nearly twenty envelopes onto the workbench.

"Most aren't yours."

"I guessed."

"You've become the unofficial post office again."

Elias smiled.

"It saves everyone a journey."

Jonas nodded.

"Three are for you."

Elias recognized one handwriting immediately.

"Otto."

"The engineer?"

"Yes."

Jonas pointed toward another envelope.

"And that's from Helena."

"The librarian?"

"The same."

Elias carefully set both letters aside without opening them.

"What else?"

Jonas grinned.

"Books."

He disappeared back inside before returning with two stout bundles tied carefully in twine.

"Fresh copies from New Haven."

Elias untied the first package.

The Art of Precision Machining.

Modern Small Diesel Improvements.

Applied Electronics for Rural Workshops.

Local Radio Antenna Design.

He turned over another volume whose green cloth cover immediately caught his attention.

Forgotten Engineering Projects of the Late Twenty-First Century.

"I've been waiting for this."

"I suspected."

Jonas laughed.

"They sold nearly every copy before breakfast."

"They printed more?"

"Of course."

"No shortages?"

"Not this time."

He reached for another stack.

"These are novels."

Elias raised an eyebrow.

"I do occasionally read something without pistons."

"I know."

Jonas handed him another book.

The Orchard at White Hill.

"I've heard it's good."

"So have I."

Next came several carefully wrapped boxes.

Injector nozzles.

Industrial bearings.

Microcontrollers packed inside anti-static bags.

Even several freshly manufactured processors produced by one of the country's electronics workshops.

Elias examined one thoughtfully.

"They're making these locally now?"

"For almost two years."

"I hadn't seen the newest revision."

"They've improved power consumption."

"Who designed them?"

"A workshop near Glass Lake."

"I'll have to visit."

"You probably will."

Jonas continued unloading.

"I also brought software."

He placed several DVD cases upon the workbench.

Workshop CAD Suite 2081 Revision 3.

Electrical Simulation Pro.

Harvest Accounting.

"They've already updated it?"

Jonas nodded.

"Apparently someone finally solved that memory leak."

Elias laughed quietly.

"About time."

The merchant leaned comfortably against the workbench while Elias stacked the new arrivals neatly beside his computers.

"I've also brought news."

"I was wondering when we'd reach that part."

Jonas folded his arms.

"North Bridge finished rebuilding their hydroelectric station."

"Already?"

"Three months ahead of schedule."

"They work quickly."

"They had help from six neighboring valleys."

"Temporary volunteers?"

Jonas nodded.

"As soon as construction finished everyone returned home."

"Good."

"No one stayed to manage anything."

"As it should be."

Jonas continued.

"Green Valley Medicine has completed another antibiotic."

"The one for resistant lung infections?"

"The very one."

"They've already begun distributing it?"

"Wagons left yesterday."

"Excellent."

Jonas smiled.

"My niece says they also developed a portable refrigeration box that keeps vaccines cold for almost four days."

"Without electricity?"

"Just phase-change cooling blocks."

Elias looked genuinely impressed.

"That's clever."

The merchant reached into another pocket.

"Copper Hill has begun manufacturing brushless electric motors."

"I heard rumors."

"They're true."

"Reliable?"

"So far."

"I'd like to examine one."

"I suspected."

Jonas chuckled.

"I nearly bought you one."

"You probably should have."

"I'll bring it next month."

Another piece of news followed.

"The software workshop in Iron Bridge released a new engineering drawing package."

"I've already received it."

"They're planning collaborative design now."

Elias looked up.

"Through merchants?"

Jonas nodded.

"One workshop develops the drawing."

"The next improves it."

"The third tests it."

"Then updated versions circulate again."

Elias smiled thoughtfully.

"Knowledge travelling slower than the old Internet."

"But reaching everyone eventually."

"And belonging to everyone."

"Exactly."

A comfortable silence settled between them for a moment before Jonas' expression grew slightly more serious.

"I've one less pleasant report."

Elias looked up immediately.

"The old cities?"

Jonas nodded once.

"Two merchant caravans spotted armed men near the eastern industrial district."

"Many?"

"Perhaps fifteen."

"Organized?"

"Poorly."

"What were they doing?"

"Living among factory ruins."

"Scavenging?"

"Partly."

Jonas hesitated.

"They fired warning shots when traders approached."

"No injuries?"

"No."

"They shouted something?"

"They kept yelling that they'd rebuild the government."

Elias sighed quietly.

"They've been saying that for thirty years."

Jonas nodded.

"Most people simply turned around."

"Wisest decision."

"The road remains open if you keep west."

Elias rested a hand upon one of the new engineering books.

"Eventually someone will have to retrieve machinery from those factories."

"I imagine someone wearing brass goggles might volunteer."

Elias smiled faintly.

"I've been accused of worse ideas."

Jonas laughed.

"I thought you might."

The horses outside shifted comfortably beneath the shade while the afternoon breeze stirred the leaves above the workshop yard. Around them the valley continued its ordinary rhythm. Somewhere beyond the next hill a tractor started its engine. Children's laughter floated faintly through the warm air. A distant radio station began broadcasting violin music followed by an announcement inviting everyone to the coming woodworking festival at Willow Crossing. Jonas looked out toward the quiet countryside before speaking almost to himself.

"You know," he said, "every month I travel farther than I did the month before."

"And?"

"I keep expecting to find some place where people aren't building something."

Elias looked around his workshop filled with books, machines, computers and carefully organized tools.

"Have you found one yet?"

Jonas smiled.

"Not once."

Jonas remained leaning against the workbench for a while, absentmindedly turning his hat between his hands. Outside, one of the horses lowered its head to drink from the stone trough beneath the walnut tree, while the other lazily flicked its tail at persistent flies. The afternoon had settled into that pleasant stillness where every sound seemed to travel farther. Somewhere beyond the fields came the distant clatter of a threshing machine, followed by the sharp whistle of someone calling across a pasture. Elias placed the last of the new books upon the shelf before returning to the workbench, where Jonas had spread a folded road map across the oak surface.

The paper had become soft at its folds from years of travel. Small notes filled the margins in Jonas' tidy handwriting, marking repaired bridges, new workshops, abandoned roads reclaimed by forests, seasonal markets and villages that welcomed overnight travelers. Unlike maps from the old world, there were no national borders, no provinces outlined in different colors, no capital cities dominating the page. Instead, hundreds of settlements appeared like beads scattered across rivers, valleys and old highways, connected by practical routes people had discovered over three decades of peaceful travel.

Jonas tapped one weathered finger near the eastern side of the map.

"You remember Blackstone Industrial District?"

Elias studied the faded name.

"I've never been there."

"You've certainly heard about it."

"I've heard stories."

"They're mostly true."

Jonas smiled faintly.

"It used to be one of the largest industrial regions before the Reckoning."

"Engines?"

"Among other things."

He traced a rough circle over several square kilometers.

"Diesel engines."

"Machine tools."

"Industrial pumps."

"Bearings."

"Hydraulic equipment."

"Electrical motors."

"Mining machinery."

"There were three foundries, two steel mills and a precision engineering works."

Elias whistled quietly.

"That much?"

"Much more."

"What happened after the cities emptied?"

Jonas folded his arms.

"The workers walked away."

"And left everything?"

"They took tools."

"They took drawings."

"They took their families."

"They took whatever fit into wagons."

He looked toward the open workshop doors where the peaceful valley stretched beneath the afternoon sun.

"The buildings remained."

Elias imagined enormous workshops standing silent beneath broken skylights.

"The machines?"

"Many still sit exactly where they stopped."

"Rust?"

"Some."

"Collapsed roofs?"

"A few."

"But not everywhere."

Jonas pointed again.

"Several workshops had reinforced concrete roofs."

"They've survived remarkably well."

"No one salvaged them?"

"Oh, people have."

"For thirty years."

He laughed softly.

"But those places were enormous."

"You could spend a lifetime exploring them."

Elias rested one hand upon the map.

"So why tell me now?"

Jonas looked at him knowingly.

"Because of what I found."

From another pocket inside his long coat he withdrew a folded notebook page.

"I met an old machinist."

"Where?"

"Stone River."

"The engine builders?"

"The same."

"He worked in Blackstone before the Reckoning."

"He was young then."

"Nearly eighty now."

Jonas handed over the paper.

The rough sketch showed the outline of a massive factory floor. Several handwritten arrows pointed toward individual buildings.

Machine Shop No. 3.

Precision Grinding Hall.

Tool Storage.

Inspection Laboratory.

Deep Storage.

Elias' eyes narrowed.

"He remembered all this?"

"Perfectly."

"He says Machine Shop Three built precision lathes unlike anything currently produced."

Jonas tapped another building.

"The inspection laboratory stored measuring instruments."

"Still useful?"

"If they've survived."

He pointed farther north.

"And beneath this warehouse..."

He paused.

"...there was an underground storage vault."

"What was inside?"

"The old man doesn't know."

"He only remembers deliveries arriving every week."

"What kind?"

"He never saw."

"Everything disappeared below ground."

Elias looked thoughtfully at the drawing.

"If no one opened it..."

Jonas nodded.

"It may still be sealed."

The workshop grew quiet for a moment.

Outside, a gentle breeze stirred the leaves above the yard.

Elias unfolded the paper completely.

"The roads?"

"Mostly overgrown."

"Bridges?"

"One collapsed."

"The western route still works."

"Danger?"

Jonas hesitated before answering.

"Not from the buildings."

"The buildings are honest."

"It's the people."

"The same group you mentioned earlier?"

"The remnants."

Jonas nodded once.

"They're scattered."

"Not an army."

"Not even particularly organized."

"They've hidden themselves inside parts of the district."

"What do they live on?"

"Scavenging."

"Hunting."

"Occasionally robbing careless travelers."

"They still imagine someone will rebuild the old order."

"They call themselves restorers."

Elias frowned slightly.

"Restoring ruins."

"Mostly."

"They collect old uniforms."

"They decorate abandoned offices."

"They argue endlessly about who should govern once everyone comes back."

Jonas shook his head with quiet disbelief.

"The cities have been empty for over thirty years."

"No one's coming back."

"No."

"They don't seem able to accept it."

Elias looked once more toward the peaceful fields beyond his workshop.

"It must be lonely."

"I imagine so."

"They're surrounded by thousands of empty offices."

"Broken windows."

"Silent factories."

"They keep waiting for crowds that never arrive."

Jonas smiled sadly.

"I've never understood why anyone would choose that."

"Neither have I."

The merchant reached toward another crate resting beside the workbench.

"I actually brought something from there."

He lifted away the lid.

Wrapped carefully inside old canvas lay a steel gear nearly thirty centimeters across.

Its teeth remained perfectly machined despite the years.

Not a single patch of rust marked its surface.

Elias lifted it with both hands.

"Heavy."

"Chromium alloy."

Jonas nodded.

"The machinist identified it immediately."

"Where did you find it?"

"Near the entrance of Machine Shop Three."

"Just lying there."

Elias examined the flawless machining.

"We can't manufacture this quality yet."

"Exactly."

"The tolerances?"

"Probably within a few microns."

He turned the gear slowly.

"Whoever made this knew exactly what they were doing."

Jonas smiled.

"Which is why I thought of you."

Elias carefully returned it to the crate.

"If there are complete machine tools still inside..."

"There probably are."

"They'd transform half the workshops in the country."

Jonas nodded.

"Not because one factory would produce everything again."

"No."

"But because hundreds of workshops could copy what they learned."

"The knowledge would spread."

"The machines would spread."

"And every valley would build its own."

Elias smiled thoughtfully.

"Exactly the way things should."

Jonas folded the map.

"I haven't told many people."

"Why not?"

"Because treasure hunters hear stories differently from engineers."

Elias laughed.

"They'd strip everything they could carry."

"They'd fight over it."

"You'd catalog it."

"Repair it."

"Figure out how it works."

"Then help everyone build another."

Jonas looked around the workshop one more time.

"I've known you nearly twenty years."

"You've never repaired something simply to own it."

"You repair it because someone will use it."

The words lingered comfortably between them.

Outside, the afternoon sun had begun its slow descent toward the western forests, painting the distant wheat fields with warm amber light. Swallows

skimmed low above the road, while another merchant's wagon appeared as a tiny shape far beyond the next hill. Somewhere across the valley, a homemade radio station interrupted its music for an engineering bulletin.

"Attention mechanics travelling through the eastern districts. Copper Hill reports successful testing of a newly designed brushless grain elevator motor. Construction drawings will be available through registered merchants beginning next week. Workshops wishing to manufacture the design locally are encouraged to copy and improve it."

Jonas smiled as the announcement drifted faintly through the workshop windows.

"There it is again."

"What?"

"The best habit this country ever developed."

Elias listened quietly.

"No patents."

"No monopolies."

"No one locking knowledge away."

Jonas nodded toward the radio.

"Someone builds something useful."

"A week later half the country is improving it."

Elias looked down at the old factory sketch still lying open upon the bench.

"If Blackstone still holds what you think it does..."

"...then perhaps the next improvement is waiting there."

## Journey

The sun had begun its slow descent toward the western forests, softening the hard edges of the valley with warm amber light. Long shadows stretched from every fence post and orchard tree, reaching lazily across fields where the day's work was drawing to a close. The wheat shimmered like polished bronze whenever the evening breeze swept across it, while swallows skimmed only a few centimeters above the grain, hunting insects before nightfall. Smoke rose from dozens of chimneys throughout the scattered farms, carrying the comforting scent of burning birch, roasting vegetables and fresh bread into the cooling air.

The road outside Elias' workshop remained quietly alive. A pair of young brothers guided three milk cows home from pasture, laughing whenever one of the animals stubbornly wandered toward an apple tree. An elderly carpenter pedaled past on an old bicycle towing a small trailer stacked with freshly finished oak chairs destined for the coming woodworking festival. Behind him, a woman drove a compact electric tractor pulling crates filled with tomatoes, onions and bundles of herbs that would be sold at the Saturday market before sunrise.

No whistles announced the end of a workday.

No factory sirens emptied buildings.

People simply finished when the day's work had been honestly completed.

Inside the workshop Elias folded Jonas' map carefully along its worn creases before slipping it into a leather document tube. The rough drawing of Blackstone Industrial District rested beside Otto's unopened letter and Helena's careful handwriting, waiting until the evening grew quieter. Before any journey he preferred knowing exactly what information he already possessed before collecting more.

He walked toward a tall wooden cabinet beside the computer desks and opened its heavy doors.

Behind them rested shelves lined with traveling equipment assembled over many years.

Canvas backpacks of different sizes.

Coiled climbing rope.

Waterproof tarps.

Sleeping blankets rolled tightly inside waxed canvas.

Several radio antennas of different lengths.

Everything had its place.

Everything had been repaired more than once.

Elias selected his familiar canvas backpack. Time had faded its original olive-green fabric into a softer greyish color, while darker patches covered places where leather corners had worn through. Every buckle had been replaced at least once. Brass rivets reinforced the shoulder straps, and dozens of careful stitches spoke of years spent mending rather than replacing.

He laid it upon the workbench.

From another cabinet came carefully wrapped tool rolls.

Combination spanners.

Adjustable wrench.

Precision screwdrivers.

Magnifying loupe.

Every item disappeared into familiar pockets without hesitation.

He paused before selecting another tool.

A compact cordless drill.

He weighed it thoughtfully.

"Probably."

It joined the growing collection.

His broad working knife received fresh oil before sliding comfortably into its leather sheath attached to the side of the backpack. The shotgun came next.

He removed the waxed cloth protecting it and examined the old double-barreled weapon beneath the workshop lights. The walnut stock carried countless small dents accumulated over decades, yet every scratch had been polished smooth by use. Elias opened the breech.

Empty.

He cleaned both barrels with practiced efficiency before slipping twelve cartridges into a small leather pouch.

He never enjoyed carrying firearms.

The roads remained among the safest they had ever been.

Most journeys passed without anything more dangerous than heavy rain or fallen trees.

Still, abandoned cities belonged to another world.

The shotgun returned to its place across the backpack.

His old military pistol required even less attention.

Magazine.

Spring.

Barrel.

Clean.

Loaded.

Holstered.

Finished.

He hoped not to touch it again until another routine cleaning weeks later.

The workshop gradually darkened as the sunlight withdrew from the windows. Elias walked toward the portable radio resting beside his coffee mug and turned the tuning wheel slightly.

Static.

A burst of music.

More static.

Then a familiar voice emerged clearly.

"...and now the evening report from Valley Voice Radio."

Elias carried the radio across the workshop, setting it upon the welding table while continuing his preparations.

"Current weather observations from stations across the region. Clear skies continue throughout the central valleys. Temperatures tonight are expected to fall to twelve degrees. Tomorrow afternoon scattered rain will arrive from the southwest, moving toward North Bridge by evening. Travelers crossing Forest Pass should expect slippery roads after sunset."

A brief melody played between announcements, performed by fiddle, accordion and acoustic guitar.

The announcer returned.

"Trade notices."

A sheet of paper rustled.

"Green Valley Medicine reports surplus production of insulin and broad-spectrum antibiotics. Merchants heading east are invited to collect shipments beginning Friday morning."

Another pause.

"Glass Lake Optical Works has completed another production run of microscope lenses and surveying instruments."

The next announcement carried obvious enthusiasm.

"Copper Hill Engineering announces that construction drawings for the new brushless irrigation motor are now available free of charge. Workshops are encouraged to modify the design to suit local needs. Updated improvements should be returned through merchants so revised editions may circulate during autumn."

Elias smiled quietly.

"Someone already will be."

He tightened another strap on the backpack.

The radio continued.

"Festival calendar."

"The Willow Crossing Woodworking Fair opens in four days."

"The Autumn Book Gathering at New Haven begins next month."

"The Harvest Music Festival at River Meadow follows one week later."

"The National Engineering Exhibition hosted this year by Iron Bridge will welcome mechanics, machinists, programmers, electricians, radio builders and inventors from every region. Demonstrations of agricultural machinery, software presentations, radio construction competitions and technical lectures will continue for six days."

Elias looked toward the growing stack of engineering books Jonas had delivered.

"I may have to visit this year."

The broadcast shifted once more.

"Messages carried by merchant request."

The announcer's voice softened slightly.

"To Anna from White Mill."

"Your brother arrived safely in Glass Lake. The new prosthetic arm fits well, and he has already returned to work."

Another.

"To Martin at Stone River."

"Your replacement turbine bearings have been completed."

Another.

"To anyone travelling toward Birch Hollow."

"The eastern bridge remains closed for repairs. Use the western crossing until further notice."

There was something comforting about hearing names drift through the air. The country had become too large for everyone to know one another personally, yet small enough that voices carried familiar warmth instead of anonymous authority.

Outside, the village settled gently into evening.

Windows glowed with soft yellow light.

Children chased each other between gardens until mothers called them home for supper.

Someone nearby practiced the violin.

Dogs barked lazily at passing wagons.

A blacksmith closed heavy wooden shutters after finishing the day's final horseshoe.

Two elderly neighbors sat beneath an apple tree playing chess upon a weathered wooden board while discussing whether steam-powered threshers would ever become lighter.

Farther down the road laughter spilled from a small café where travelers and local farmers shared supper around long oak tables. A merchant unpacked several newly arrived novels while another demonstrated a locally written strategy game on a portable computer to three fascinated teenagers who argued enthusiastically over the best way to design an efficient railway system.

The world slowed naturally as darkness approached.

Elias finished tightening the final leather strap across his backpack before placing it beside the workshop door.

He unfolded Jonas' map once more.

Blackstone.

Machine Shop Number Three.

Inspection Laboratory.

Underground Storage.

He studied the rough sketch without speaking.

Outside, the first stars appeared above the eastern hills while somewhere far across the valley another homemade radio station began its nightly music program. Soft piano joined a lone violin, drifting through the warm summer air with remarkable clarity.

Elias extinguished the workshop lights one by one.

Tomorrow would still belong to familiar engines, broken pumps and patient repairs.

Soon afterward, however, the quiet roads would lead east toward abandoned factories where silent machines had waited more than thirty years for someone to wake them again.

Morning arrived beneath a sky washed clean by the light rain that had passed quietly during the night. The clouds had drifted eastward before dawn, leaving behind cool, clear air that carried the scent of damp earth, pine needles and wildflowers blooming along the roadside. Every blade of grass shimmered beneath thousands of tiny drops of water that caught the first sunlight like scattered glass. Thin ribbons of mist lingered over streams winding through the valley, slowly dissolving as the warmth of another summer day spread across the countryside.

Elias stood outside the workshop fastening the last buckle on his canvas backpack. The heavy leather coat hung comfortably from his shoulders despite the cool morning, its familiar weight almost unnoticed after so many years. The brass-and-steel goggles rested where they always did, secured around his head by the thick black rubber strap that had darkened with age but remained as strong as the day he first fitted it. The shotgun lay strapped securely across the back of the pack beneath a waxed canvas cover, while the holstered pistol rested quietly against his right hip. His broad working knife occupied its usual place beside the tool pouch, more likely to trim rope or scrape old gaskets than anything else.

He stepped back into the workshop one final time.

The familiar room stood exactly as he preferred to leave it.

Every wrench hung neatly upon its hook.

Every drawer remained closed.

The welding machines had been disconnected.

The computers entered their quiet sleep, their monitors dark beneath the morning light filtering through the windows.

The repaired generator outside continued humming steadily, supplying electricity to the workshop until Elias returned.

He picked up a folded sheet of paper resting beside the front door.

Repairs Waiting

Marcus — Irrigation Pump

Lina — Chainsaw Motor

Viktor — Motorcycle Fork

Mrs. Salme — Sewing Machine

School — Laptop Keyboard

He added another short note beneath them.

Gone East.
Back in about two weeks.
Urgent repairs — ask Otto at Stone River.

Satisfied, he pinned the paper beside the entrance where arriving customers would immediately see it.

The portable radio slipped easily into one side pocket of his backpack. Elias extended its compact antenna halfway before switching it on.

Static crackled briefly.

"...good morning from Valley Voice Radio..."

He lowered the volume until it became little more than quiet company rather than distraction.

The workshop door closed behind him with the familiar sound of heavy oak meeting stone.

He turned the iron key once.

Twice.

Then slipped it into his coat pocket.

Without another glance backward, Elias started walking east.

The gravel road curved gently between fields still wet from the night's rain. Wagon tracks had filled with shallow pools reflecting strips of blue sky overhead, while tiny frogs leapt away from each approaching bootstep. Fresh mud softened the edges of the road without making travel difficult, and the cool morning breeze made the journey comfortable despite the weight of his pack.

The countryside stretched peacefully in every direction.

Broad meadows rolled across gentle hills where cattle grazed quietly among patches of buttercups and clover. Black-and-white dairy cows wandered lazily through fenced pastures, occasionally lifting their heads to watch travelers before returning to the serious business of eating. Sheep dotted another hillside like scattered pieces of wool, guarded by two patient dogs who barely acknowledged Elias' passing.

Farther away several horses pulled a hay wagon while their owners stacked fragrant bundles beneath the strengthening sun. The rhythmic scrape of wooden pitchforks drifted faintly across the fields.

Beyond the farms stood forests that seemed almost endless.

Tall pines rose straight toward the sky, their reddish trunks glowing warmly in the morning light. Between them grew silver birches whose white bark caught

the sun like polished bone. Oaks spread enormous branches over moss-covered ground where mushrooms already pushed through the damp soil after last night's rain. Ferns lined shallow streams winding beneath the trees, while squirrels darted across fallen logs carrying breakfast between hidden nests.

Birdsong followed him almost constantly.

Blackbirds whistled from hedgerows.

Woodpeckers hammered somewhere deeper within the forest.

A hawk circled high overhead, carried effortlessly upon rising currents of warm air.

Occasionally rabbits bounded across the roadside before disappearing beneath blackberry bushes.

Everything felt alive.

Not crowded.

Simply alive.

The road itself had once been one of the region's major highways. The cracked asphalt still emerged here and there beneath layers of compacted gravel added over the decades whenever nearby villages repaired another section. Grass pushed confidently through old expansion joints while wildflowers occupied broken shoulders that had once carried endless streams of automobiles.

An old road sign appeared ahead, leaning noticeably to one side.

Its faded reflective surface still bore letters almost erased by weather.

EAST CAPITAL
132 km

Someone many years ago had carefully painted another sign beneath it using dark green enamel.

BLACKSTONE
115 km

STONE RIVER
42 km

GLASS LAKE
67 km

The old destination remained untouched.

No one had bothered removing it.

It simply belonged to another age.

Elias paused only long enough to drink from his canteen before continuing.

Several kilometers farther another relic stood beside the road.

A rusting metal frame that had once supported a large government information board.

Nothing remained except the empty framework.

Someone had planted climbing roses around its base years earlier. Their red blossoms climbed the weathered steel, almost completely hiding what had once been a place filled with official notices and regulations.

Nature seemed remarkably patient.

Given enough time, it quietly reclaimed everything.

The radio crackled softly.

"...morning livestock report..."

Elias smiled.

"...grass conditions remain excellent throughout the southern valleys. Veterinary workshops report no significant disease outbreaks. Several horse breeders from White Mill will attend next week's agricultural gathering."

The announcer paused before another message.

"A reminder for travelers heading east. Bridge Number Seven beyond Forest Pass has now reopened following repairs completed yesterday by volunteers from Oak Crossing and Birch Hollow. Many thanks to everyone who assisted."

No government department.

No highway authority.

Simply people repairing the bridge because everyone used it.

The thought passed through Elias' mind as naturally as noticing another bird overhead.

The forest gradually drew closer until the road entered beneath towering pines. Sunlight filtered through thousands of branches, painting moving patterns across the damp ground. Cool shade replaced the warmth of open fields while the air filled with the rich scent of resin, moss and wet bark.

The silence beneath the trees differed from that of the meadows.

Not empty.

Simply deeper.

Now and then another traveler appeared.

A young couple rode past on bicycles carrying fishing equipment toward one of the northern lakes.

An elderly beekeeper guided a wagon filled with painted wooden hives.

Two engineers walked together discussing gear ratios while pushing a small trailer carrying parts for a wind-powered water pump.

Everyone greeted one another.

Nobody appeared suspicious.

Nobody hurried.

The country had grown accustomed to strangers because strangers usually carried knowledge, tools, books or stories instead of orders.

Late in the morning the forest opened briefly onto another broad valley.

Several farms lay scattered beneath rolling hills, each surrounded by orchards heavy with ripening apples and pears. Vegetable gardens stretched behind sturdy stone houses whose solar panels glinted quietly beside traditional slate roofs. Chickens wandered freely between barns while ducks floated peacefully upon a pond bordered by reeds. Near one farmhouse a family worked together repairing a tractor beneath an open shed, laughter carrying across the fields whenever someone dropped a wrench or offered advice that everyone immediately ignored.

Elias slowed his pace for a moment.

He always enjoyed seeing people repairing their own machines.

It reminded him that knowledge had become something shared instead of guarded.

Ahead, the road disappeared once more beneath another wall of green forest.

Somewhere beyond those trees waited Stone River.

Beyond Stone River lay Blackstone.

And somewhere inside the silent factories Jonas had described, machines that had slept for more than thirty years waited beneath dust and darkness for hands willing to understand them instead of merely dismantling them.

By early afternoon the forest gradually began to thin. The towering pines gave way to broad-leafed oaks, maples and ash trees whose branches arched gracefully over the road, casting shifting patterns of sunlight across the gravel beneath Elias' boots. The air had changed almost without notice. The sharp scent of pine resin faded, replaced by the warm fragrance of freshly cut timber, drying sawdust and linseed oil. Even before the first buildings came into view, the valley announced what its people did for a living.

A neatly carved wooden sign stood beside the roadside beneath an enormous oak whose branches shaded the entrance.

## Willow Crossing

Below the village name another line had been carved by hand years earlier.

*"Wood remembers the hands that shaped it."*

The lettering itself had become a work of craftsmanship. Tiny oak leaves curled around every capital letter, while birds, squirrels and flowering vines had been carved so delicately into the border that they seemed almost alive. Someone had recently polished the wood with beeswax, giving it a warm golden glow beneath the afternoon sunlight.

Elias slowed his pace.

The road widened as it entered the village. Rather than long straight streets, Willow Crossing had grown naturally around a small river that wound gently through the valley. Wooden bridges crossed the clear water every few hundred meters, each one entirely different from the next. One bridge displayed elaborate carved railings depicting forest animals. Another had been built almost entirely from laminated oak beams joined without visible metal fasteners. A third carried hanging flower boxes overflowing with red geraniums whose blossoms swayed gently in the breeze.

The houses seemed to grow from the trees themselves.

Most had sturdy stone foundations, but nearly everything above ground had been built from timber. Massive oak beams framed the walls, while cedar shingles covered steep roofs designed to shed winter snow. Wide porches faced the streets, their railings carved with patterns unique to each family. Some depicted wheat and fruit trees. Others showed rivers, birds or geometric designs handed down through generations of craftsmen. No two houses appeared identical, yet together they formed a harmonious whole, as though each builder had quietly respected the work of his neighbors without copying it.

Almost every window stood open.

The pleasant tapping of chisels drifted from workshops throughout the village.

Somewhere a bandsaw hummed steadily.

Elsewhere the rhythmic scrape of hand planes moved across hardwood surfaces with almost musical precision.

The entire settlement seemed to breathe through the quiet sounds of people making useful things.

Elias crossed the first bridge and entered the central square.

Unlike the abandoned cities Jonas had described, no building towered over the others. There was no grand municipal hall or government office left standing from another age. Instead, the square surrounded a broad green lawn shaded by ancient lindens beneath which stood long communal tables built from polished oak. Several older villagers sat there drinking tea while discussing the coming woodworking fair, occasionally pausing to admire a child proudly carrying a small carved bird toward his parents.

A stone fountain occupied the center of the square.

Instead of statues celebrating rulers or soldiers, four carved wooden figures stood around its edge.

A carpenter.

A blacksmith.

A farmer.

A teacher holding an open book.

Water flowed gently around them before disappearing into a narrow channel that irrigated flower beds surrounding the square.

Elias smiled.

Someone had clearly understood what deserved remembering.

Beyond the fountain stretched the village workshops.

One building specialized in furniture.

Rows of rocking chairs, dining tables and bookshelves stood beneath the open awning awaiting buyers.

Another workshop produced musical instruments.

Violins hung from ceiling beams beside carefully crafted guitars, cellos and wooden flutes whose polished surfaces reflected the afternoon light.

Farther along stood a workshop devoted entirely to windows and doors. Freshly glazed frames leaned carefully against the walls, each fitted with beautifully carved handles fashioned from walnut or cherry wood.

The smell changed every few steps.

Fresh oak.

Warm pine.

Boiled linseed oil.

Natural varnish.

Cedar.

Walnut shavings.

The fragrances blended into something uniquely comforting.

Near one workshop several apprentices worked together around a large workbench. Their instructor, a broad-shouldered woman perhaps sixty years old, moved quietly among them offering advice without ever raising her voice.

"No."

She smiled gently as one young man reached too quickly for another tool.

"Let the plane do the work."

"Don't force it."

"Listen to the wood."

The apprentice slowed his movement.

A smooth ribbon of pale oak curled away from the board.

"There."

She nodded.

"Now it's speaking properly."

No grades were given.

No certificates waited at the end.

The satisfaction upon the young man's face suggested none were necessary.

Elias continued walking.

Outside one of the larger workshops stood a curious sight.

Several long tables displayed small wooden objects, each bearing a handwritten note.

Cabinet hinge.

Improved handle.

Stronger drawer joint.

Visitors examined them freely, discussing each design with genuine interest.

A middle-aged craftsman noticed Elias studying the display.

"Try it."

He pointed toward a folding chair.

Elias unfolded it.

The joints locked smoothly with almost no effort.

"Nicely done."

"We improved the old design."

"How?"

The craftsman pointed toward the underside.

"Different pivot."

"Simpler."

"Stronger."

"You'll find the drawings over there."

He gestured toward a shelf where neatly bound booklets rested inside waterproof boxes.

"Take one."

Elias looked at him.

"You don't sell them?"

The man laughed.

"The chairs?"

"Certainly."

"The drawings?"

"They're free."

"If someone builds a better version, bring us a copy."

Elias smiled.

"I like that arrangement."

"It saves everyone time."

Several visitors had already taken booklets.

One elderly carpenter tucked two beneath his arm before remarking cheerfully,

"My granddaughter will improve this hinge before winter."

"Good," the craftsman replied.

"Bring her version back."

As Elias walked farther into the village, another custom became apparent.

Nearly every workshop displayed a beautifully carved wooden plaque beside its entrance.

Instead of advertisements, each listed practical information.

Current Waiting Time:
Six Days.

Apprentices Welcome.

Repairs Accepted.

Construction Drawings Available Inside.

Coffee Always Free.

One simply read:

*"Come in if you're curious."*

Elias laughed quietly to himself.

That invitation alone explained the village better than any long description could.

The afternoon sun cast warm golden light across the timber buildings while the river flowed quietly beneath its graceful bridges. Families wandered comfortably between workshops, children stopping to watch woodturners shape bowls upon lathes while older visitors examined handcrafted furniture destined to remain in use for generations. Nobody shouted for customers. Nobody competed by drowning out the neighboring workshop. Every craftsman seemed confident enough in his own work to let visitors choose freely.

As Elias reached the far end of the square, familiar laughter drifted from an open doorway.

"Lina!"

She looked up immediately from a workbench covered in carved chair legs.

"You actually came."

"I said I might."

She brushed a strand of hair behind one ear, smiling.

"My father kept saying, 'The mechanic with the goggles will stop eventually.'"

"And was he right?"

She laughed.

"He usually is."

Behind her the workshop stretched deep into the building, filled with elegant furniture in every stage of completion. Sunlight poured through tall windows onto benches worn smooth by decades of careful craftsmanship, while somewhere inside someone quietly hummed an old melody as another plane whispered across polished oak. The heart of Willow Crossing lay not only in the wood its people shaped, but in the quiet understanding that good work was something to be shared, improved and passed onward, just as naturally as the forests themselves continued growing around the peaceful village.

Lina led Elias through the workshop and out the rear doors where the sound of moving water grew steadily louder. Behind the furniture shop the village opened into a broad riverside where Willow Crossing's largest sawmill stood beneath a long timber roof supported by immense oak beams darkened from decades of service. The river itself curved gently around polished granite boulders before disappearing beneath the mill, its current turning a massive waterwheel whose steady rotation had become part of the village's heartbeat.

The great wheel creaked softly as water pushed against its paddles. Heavy wooden gears transferred the motion into the building, where thick shafts disappeared beneath the floor before emerging again beside modern electric motors and drive belts. The machinery represented nearly seventy years of careful improvements. Original water-powered mechanisms worked beside newer generators, electronic controls and diesel backup systems without the slightest disagreement, each generation of technology quietly assisting the next.

Several workers looked up as Elias approached.

An elderly man with broad shoulders despite his age wiped wood dust from his hands and walked forward smiling.

"So the famous mechanic finally arrived."

Lina laughed.

"I told you he would."

The old man extended a weathered hand.

"Edgar."

"Elias."

"I've heard about your workshop."

"I've heard about your furniture."

Edgar chuckled.

"People exaggerate both."

"They usually do."

Behind Edgar, thick oak trunks rested upon roller conveyors waiting to be cut into boards. Two younger workers guided another log carefully toward the enormous circular saw whose polished blade stood nearly two meters in diameter. Fine sawdust drifted lazily through shafts of afternoon sunlight before disappearing into large extraction pipes that carried it toward storage silos outside. Nothing went to waste. Sawdust heated homes during winter, supplied animal bedding or became fuel pellets produced in another nearby workshop.

Edgar nodded toward the far end of the building.

"The trouble's over there."

They walked together between rows of machinery.

Every few meters another familiar smell reached Elias.

Fresh pine.

Grease.

Machine oil.

The scent of honest work.

Near the rear wall one conveyor had fallen silent.

A broad belt lay slack upon the floor while several freshly cut planks remained stranded halfway through the machine.

Edgar folded his arms.

"It started making noise yesterday."

"What kind?"

"Metallic."

"Grinding?"

"A little."

"Then it stopped."

Elias knelt beside the gearbox without answering.

He removed one inspection cover.

Dark oil remained perfectly clean.

"No broken teeth."

He rotated the shaft by hand.

Smooth.

Another shaft.

Smooth again.

Then the third.

Halfway around it caught slightly.

"There."

He reached for his flashlight.

Deep inside the gearbox one bronze bearing had worn almost completely through. Tiny bronze flakes rested in the bottom of the housing.

"How long since this bearing was changed?"

Edgar scratched his beard thoughtfully.

"Twelve years perhaps."

"I'd say closer to fifteen."

"Possibly."

Lina crouched beside them.

"Can it be repaired?"

Elias smiled.

"It already has."

She looked confused.

"What do you mean?"

He pointed toward the bearing.

"Whoever installed this left extra adjustment."

He loosened two retaining bolts before sliding the housing sideways several millimeters. The worn section disappeared from the load surface. He tightened everything again. The shaft now turned freely.

Edgar's eyebrows rose.

"I never noticed that."

"The machinist who built it planned ahead."

Lina laughed.

"So we worried over nothing?"

"Oh, you'll still need another bearing."

"When?"

"Within a few months."

Edgar nodded.

"I'll order one."

"You won't need to."

Elias reached into his backpack. A notebook. Pencil. Then another compartment. Calipers. He measured carefully. Outside diameter. Inside diameter. Width. Oil groove. He finished with several quick sketches.

"I'll machine one myself after I return home."

"You have bronze stock?"

"Enough."

Edgar smiled.

"I'll gladly pay."

"You'll pay for the material."

"And your work."

Elias shrugged.

"We'll discuss it later."

The old carpenter laughed.

"Mechanics are impossible."

"So people keep telling me."

While Elias cleaned the housing, several younger workers gathered nearby, watching with quiet curiosity.

One of them finally asked,

"Do you enjoy fixing old machines?"

Elias continued wiping the bearing surfaces.

"I enjoy understanding them."

"They're only machines."

"They're someone's work."

The young man considered that.

"I hadn't thought about it that way."

Edgar smiled without looking away.

"You will."

Another worker placed a kettle over a small stove standing beside the wall. Within minutes the smell of fresh coffee drifted through the workshop. Nobody seemed surprised that work had paused. One woman disappeared briefly before returning with thick slices of dark bread, smoked cheese, fresh butter and apples picked that morning from the village orchard. She placed everything upon a broad oak table.

"Eat before you continue."

Nobody questioned it. Nobody hurried anyone. Everyone simply gathered together. The conversation wandered naturally while Elias worked. One carpenter held up a newly carved cabinet handle.

"What do you think?"

Edgar turned it over thoughtfully.

"Comfortable."

"But make this curve softer."

He demonstrated with one finger.

"The hand notices."

The younger man nodded.

"I'll redo it."

No disappointment crossed his face. Only quiet determination. Lina poured coffee into sturdy ceramic mugs.

"My brother returned yesterday."

"From where?" Edgar asked.

"Glass Lake."

"How was it?"

"They've begun producing new microscope lenses."

"For doctors?"

"And engineers."

"They're apparently sharper than anything before."

Edgar nodded approvingly.

"Good."

A woman sanding chair backs looked up.

"My daughter starts there next month."

"Studying optics?"

"Grinding lenses."

"She always liked careful work."

Another carpenter laughed.

"Unlike my son."

"What does he do now?"

"Programs computers."

Several people smiled.

"Does he enjoy it?"

"He says he spends all day arguing with invisible mistakes."

The whole table laughed. Elias looked up.

"That sounds accurate."

"You program too?"

"A little."

"What?"

"Mostly machine controls."

"My son wrote software for our drying kiln."

"Useful?"

"It reduced firewood consumption by nearly twenty percent."

"That's excellent."

The carpenter grinned proudly.

"He says next he'll automate the ventilation."

Edgar shook his head affectionately.

"The young always find something to improve."

"They usually succeed."

The radio sitting upon a nearby shelf quietly filled another pause in conversation.

"…this evening's engineering bulletin…"

Someone turned the volume slightly higher.

"The New Haven library reports completion of another archive project. Over two hundred additional technical books from before the Reckoning have now

been restored, digitized and copied onto optical media. Printed editions will also become available through merchants beginning next month."

Edgar smiled.

"My grandson keeps borrowing those books."

"What interests him?"

"Steam engines."

Lina laughed.

"He's twelve."

"I know."

"He insists he'll build one."

"Perhaps he will."

Another announcement followed.

"The National Mechanical Archive thanks workshops from seventeen settlements for contributing updated improvements to open agricultural machinery designs during the past quarter."

Nobody seemed surprised.

One carpenter simply nodded while spreading butter across another slice of bread.

"That's how knowledge should travel."

Everyone quietly agreed.

After finishing the coffee Elias replaced the inspection cover and tightened the final bolt.

"Let's see."

Edgar started the waterwheel clutch. Wooden gears engaged with their familiar deep clunk. The drive shaft began turning. Then the conveyor. Finally the great circular saw accelerated smoothly until its polished blade became almost invisible. No grinding. No vibration. Only the confident hum of well-maintained machinery. Fresh oak logs once again rolled steadily toward the cutting table. Edgar listened for nearly a minute before smiling broadly.

"She's herself again."

One of the younger workers ran his hand across the moving conveyor.

"Quieter too."

"The adjustment removed most of the wear."

Edgar reached for Elias' shoulder.

"You'll stay for supper."

"I don't wish to impose."

"You repaired the mill."

"That wasn't difficult."

The old carpenter laughed warmly.

"That's precisely why you should stay."

Outside, the great waterwheel continued turning beneath the golden afternoon sunlight, carrying the quiet labor of Willow Crossing forward exactly as it had for generations. Fresh boards emerged one after another from the great saw, ready to become homes, bridges, furniture, bookshelves and workshops in villages far beyond the river, each piece of timber beginning another long life shaped by hands that measured wealth not by what they accumulated, but by what they built well enough to last.

The repaired sawmill hardly had time to settle into its familiar rhythm before the atmosphere around Willow Crossing began changing almost imperceptibly. Throughout the afternoon more wagons appeared along the roads leading into the village. They arrived one by one rather than in long caravans, each carrying something different beneath carefully tied canvas covers. Some transported polished furniture wrapped in blankets. Others carried stacks of books inside waterproof crates, rolls of cloth, baskets of fruit, handmade tools, leather goods or carefully packed mechanical devices intended for the coming fair. Nothing resembled the frantic rush Elias remembered hearing about from stories of the old cities. People simply arrived when they arrived, greeting friends before unloading their wagons with patient hands.

After supper Edgar walked with Elias back toward the village square.

"You'll want to see this before the crowds come tomorrow."

"I've heard the fair is worth visiting."

Edgar smiled.

"It changes every season."

The streets had taken on an entirely different appearance since Elias first entered the village that afternoon. Folding wooden stalls now stood neatly arranged around the green. Long canvas awnings stretched between carved oak posts, casting pleasant shade over tables where tomorrow's merchants would display their work. Oil lanterns hung ready from beams overhead, waiting for evening when their warm light would reflect from polished timber and brass fittings. Children darted between the unfinished stalls pretending to

own imaginary shops while their parents quietly assembled tables, shelves and display stands nearby.

The entire village seemed to participate.

Nobody directed anyone.

No committee assigned places.

People simply knew where they belonged because they had helped organize the gathering every year for decades.

Near the river several musicians had gathered beneath a broad willow tree.

A violin.

Two acoustic guitars.

An accordion.

A wooden flute.

A young woman carried a beautifully restored cello whose varnished surface glowed warmly beneath the evening sun.

They played softly while testing their instruments rather than performing a formal concert. The melody wandered comfortably through the square, occasionally interrupted by laughter whenever someone missed a note or stopped to adjust a tuning peg.

Edgar tilted his head slightly.

"They've been practicing for nearly a week."

"They're very good."

"They're better after sunset."

As if to prove his point, the violinist began another tune, slower this time, allowing the cello to answer with deep warm notes that rolled gently across the village. Conversation continued naturally around the music. Nobody stopped speaking. Nobody applauded. The melodies simply became another pleasant part of the evening, as natural as the river flowing beneath the nearby bridges.

The marketplace itself slowly came alive.

A family from White Mill unloaded beautifully tanned leather coats, gloves, belts and heavy travel boots stitched from thick brown hide. One particularly striking coat displayed reinforced shoulders, brass buckles and removable tool pouches designed for mechanics who spent long days outdoors.

Elias paused beside it.

The leatherworker noticed.

"Try it."

Elias slipped one arm into the sleeve.

"It fits."

"It was made for travelling engineers."

The man smiled.

"We sold four last season."

Elias examined the stitching.

"Excellent work."

"My daughter insists every seam should last longer than the owner."

A cheerful young woman looked up from arranging belts.

"Otherwise what's the point?"

Edgar laughed.

"She says that every market."

"It's still true."

A few stalls farther along another merchant arranged beautifully polished brass instruments upon velvet cloth.

Compasses. Surveying telescopes. Magnifying lenses.

A sign above the table read:

Glass Lake Optical Works

A grey-haired woman carefully demonstrated a microscope to two fascinated children.

"See that?"

The younger child gasped.

"I can see the leaf!"

"You can see every little cell."

"It looks like tiny windows."

The woman smiled.

"The world always becomes larger when you look closer."

Nearby another trader carefully unpacked stacks of books. Unlike Elias' personal collection, these covered nearly every subject imaginable. History,

forestry, medicine, mechanical engineering, botany, astronomy, mathematics, novels, collected radio broadcasts, travel journals. One entire shelf carried freshly printed editions of technical manuals copied from restored archives. Another displayed locally written novels whose authors lived only a few valleys away. The bookseller recognized Edgar immediately.

"You've brought another reader."

Edgar gestured toward Elias.

"He repairs machines."

The bookseller grinned.

"Then he'll probably leave poorer than he arrived."

"I usually do."

Several readers already wandered happily between the shelves despite the market officially opening tomorrow morning. A teenage girl held up a thick engineering volume.

"Father!"

An older man looked over.

"They finally printed Volume Four."

"We've been waiting months."

"They restored another section?"

"Steam turbines."

He smiled broadly.

"We're buying it."

Nobody hurried them. The books would still be there tomorrow. And if they sold out, another print run would eventually follow. Across the square another group unpacked computers from carefully padded crates. Modern desktop systems stood beside portable laptops, replacement monitors, keyboards and storage drives. Several programmers connected one machine to a large display where colorful graphics immediately appeared. A curious crowd gathered.

"What are you showing?"

"A new farming simulator."

Someone laughed.

"More exciting than real farming?"

"Much cleaner."

The audience chuckled. Another programmer displayed educational software teaching children electrical circuits by allowing them to build virtual radios before touching real components. A teacher watched thoughtfully.

"My students will love this."

"You can copy it."

"How much?"

The programmer looked surprised.

"For the schools?"

"Yes."

"It's free."

She blinked.

"Really?"

He nodded.

"If the children improve it someday, send us their version."

Several people standing nearby smiled. Nobody found the exchange unusual. Beyond the computers another long row of stalls belonged entirely to craftsmen.

Hand-forged axes.

Copper kettles.

Ceramic dishes.

Portable radios housed in polished walnut cases. Even beautifully restored record players waited beneath protective cloth covers. A young engineer demonstrated a compact wind-powered battery charger mounted upon a folding tripod.

"It'll charge your radio in almost any weather."

An elderly traveller nodded approvingly.

"I've needed one of those."

Meanwhile, near the edge of the square, farmers arranged produce brought from surrounding valleys.

Bright tomatoes, golden onions, fresh carrots, honey, cheeses, smoked meats, herbal teas. Baskets overflowed with apples whose fragrance drifted pleasantly through the warm evening air. Children received slices of fresh watermelon while helping unload wagons. Nobody seemed interested in bargaining aggressively. Prices were discussed politely. If someone lacked

enough money, another often suggested exchanging goods or simply returning after harvest. Edgar leaned quietly toward Elias.

"People remember who helped them."

"And?"

"They usually repay kindness before debts."

Elias nodded thoughtfully.

"I've noticed."

As twilight slowly settled over Willow Crossing, volunteers lit the first oil lanterns hanging above the square. Their warm amber light reflected from polished brass, varnished wood and glass display cases until the marketplace seemed to glow from within. The musicians began playing once more, this time with greater confidence as more instruments joined the melody. Couples drifted slowly onto the open grass beneath the lindens, some dancing quietly while others simply listened with mugs of cider in their hands.

The river murmured softly beyond the bridges. Lantern light shimmered across its surface. Laughter mingled with violin music. The smell of fresh bread floated from a nearby bakery where ovens would continue working long into the night preparing tomorrow's market. Elias stood for a long moment watching the peaceful scene unfold.

Thirty-four years earlier the same evening might have been filled with traffic, advertisements, hurried crowds and anxious faces racing toward another day of work. Here, people had gathered not because anyone had ordered a festival into existence, nor because some authority wished to attract visitors or collect fees. They came because they enjoyed building beautiful things, reading good books, listening to music, meeting old friends and discovering something useful made by someone else's hands.

Edgar followed his gaze across the glowing marketplace.

"Tomorrow it'll be twice as busy."

"I believe you."

"And you'll probably forget all about travelling east for at least one day."

Elias smiled.

"I think Blackstone has waited thirty-four years."

He looked toward the lantern-lit square where craftsmen, engineers, farmers, writers, musicians and merchants continued quietly preparing for tomorrow.

"It can wait one day more."

The village awakened long before the sun reached the rooftops. Warm light filtered through the eastern trees, illuminating rows of colorful market stalls that had stood quietly waiting through the night. Dew still rested upon canvas awnings and polished wooden counters, sparkling whenever the first rays touched them. Bakers had already opened their ovens before dawn, and the comforting aroma of fresh rye bread drifted through every street, blending with roasted coffee, smoked meats and the sweet scent of apple pastries cooling upon wooden racks.

Elias stepped from the small guest room Edgar had offered him above the furniture workshop. The square below had already begun filling with visitors arriving from every direction. Wagons rolled carefully between rows of market stalls before finding places beneath the shade of large oak trees. Horses drank peacefully from stone troughs while their owners greeted old acquaintances with genuine warmth rather than hurried formality.

The festival did not begin with speeches.

Nobody climbed a platform.

Nobody declared it officially open.

The first violin began playing beneath the linden trees, a baker placed warm loaves onto his table, a bookseller unfolded the protective cloth covering his shelves, and within minutes the festival simply existed.

People wandered naturally from one stall to another. Children pulled curious parents toward tables displaying intricate wooden toys. Engineers stopped before machine demonstrations. Gardeners compared unusual fruit varieties. Readers disappeared happily among rows of books. Everywhere conversation flowed without effort. Edgar joined Elias carrying two steaming mugs.

"I thought you'd already be walking around."

"I was waiting for coffee."

"Wise decision."

They stood together watching the square gradually fill with life. Several travelling musicians had gathered near the fountain. Alongside yesterday's violin and cello now stood a hammered dulcimer, a clarinet and an upright bass mounted carefully upon a small wagon. Their melodies drifted comfortably across the market, never overwhelming conversation but quietly accompanying every corner of village life.

Across the square a programmer demonstrated a newly written educational game to several fascinated children.

"See?"

He pointed toward the monitor.

"If you overload the generator..."

The lights on the virtual village flickered.

One little boy burst into laughter.

"I broke it!"

"You certainly did."

"Can I fix it?"

"That's the whole idea."

Nearby another stall displayed beautifully restored radios. An elderly craftsman carefully explained the inside of a vacuum tube receiver to three teenagers.

"This one belonged to my grandfather."

"It still works?"

"It works better now."

"How?"

"I replaced every capacitor."

One of the boys leaned closer.

"I've never repaired one."

"You'll learn."

The old man smiled.

"Bring yours after lunch."

The festival carried its own quiet rhythm. Nobody rushed customers. People examined things because they genuinely wished to understand them. Even buying seemed secondary to conversation.

As Elias wandered farther into the square, he passed a long row of medical herb displays where fragrant bundles of lavender, mint, sage, thyme and chamomile hung drying beneath shaded awnings. Glass jars filled with carefully labeled tinctures stood beside handmade soaps, salves and herbal teas. A young couple debated the merits of two different cough syrups while an elderly woman patiently explained which wildflowers attracted the healthiest honeybees.

Beyond them stood several wagons painted dark green, each carrying the emblem of Green Valley Medicine. Their display looked practical rather than decorative. Glass bottles, sterile bandages, antibiotics, insulin, vaccines

packed inside insulated containers, portable refrigeration units quietly humming beneath the tables. Several nurses answered questions while carefully recording which merchants would transport medicines toward distant settlements later that afternoon. A cheerful little girl ran laughing between the visitors, chasing a handmade wooden windmill that spun wildly as she held it above her head. She never noticed the uneven paving stone hidden beneath the grass. Her foot caught. She stumbled forward. The windmill flew from her hand. A sharp cry echoed across the square as she struck one knee against the edge of a stone bench. Her mother reached her almost immediately.

"Oh, Mira..."

The little girl's eyes filled with tears.

"It hurts."

"I know."

Several nearby visitors instinctively stepped aside, creating space without anyone needing to ask. From behind the Green Valley wagon a woman walked quickly toward them carrying a compact leather satchel. She neither hurried nor hesitated. She simply arrived.

"May I?"

The mother nodded gratefully.

"Please."

The woman knelt beside the child. She appeared perhaps a few years younger than Elias. Her long dark hair had been gathered into a practical braid resting over one shoulder. A dark green waxed travelling coat reached almost to her knees, its reinforced elbows and carefully repaired seams suggesting many years spent upon country roads. Grey work trousers disappeared into sturdy brown leather boots whose soles carried the dust of many villages. Around her neck hung a pair of copper-framed spectacles attached to a leather cord, while her weathered medicine satchel rested quietly beside her knee.

She smiled gently.

"May I look?"

The little girl sniffled.

"It stings."

"I expect it does."

"What happened to your windmill?"

The child looked around immediately.

"It flew away."

A nearby boy retrieved it from the grass.

"It's safe."

The nurse smiled.

"Good."

"Now we can fix both of you."

The girl managed a tiny laugh through her tears. The nurse carefully rolled up the torn trouser leg. The knee had been scraped, with several small cuts where gravel had broken the skin. Nothing serious. She poured clean water over the wound. The child flinched.

"Cold."

"It'll only be cold for a moment."

She worked with calm, practiced hands. Disinfectant, soft gauze, a small adhesive dressing. Finally she reached into another pocket.

"What color?"

The little girl blinked.

"What?"

"The bandage."

"I have blue."

"Green."

"And little foxes."

The child's expression changed immediately.

"Foxes."

"I thought you might."

The nurse carefully pressed the decorated bandage into place.

"There."

She leaned back slightly.

"What do you think?"

The little girl inspected her knee with great seriousness.

"I think..."

She looked up.

"…the fox makes it hurt less."

"I've noticed they often do."

The child's mother smiled warmly.

"Thank you."

The nurse simply nodded.

"She'll be running again before supper."

The little girl stood carefully, experimented, one step and then another. Finally she smiled broadly.

"It works."

The crowd quietly resumed its conversations as naturally as it had paused. No drama lingered. Only ordinary kindness. Elias had watched the entire exchange from several meters away. Not because it had been extraordinary. Precisely because it had not. The woman closed her medicine satchel before noticing him standing nearby. For a brief moment their eyes met. She offered the same calm smile she had given the child.

"Fortunately nothing broken."

Elias nodded.

"She'll remember the fox longer than the fall."

"I hope so."

She stood, brushing a little dust from one knee of her travelling coat.

"I'm Nora."

"Elias."

"The mechanic?"

He looked faintly surprised.

"You've heard of me?"

She smiled almost imperceptibly.

"Green Valley's refrigerators don't repair themselves."

"I've repaired several."

"So I've been told."

She adjusted the strap of her medicine satchel.

"Thank you."

"For what?"

"For keeping our medicines cold."

Before Elias could answer, another voice called from the opposite side of the medical wagons.

"Nora!"

She looked over her shoulder.

"I'll be right there."

She turned back toward Elias.

"I should go."

"So should I."

She hesitated only long enough to add,

"I imagine we'll meet again."

"Quite possibly."

With that she walked calmly back toward the medical displays where another family waited with questions about medicines for an elderly grandfather. Elias watched her disappear among the gathering visitors until only the dark green travelling coat remained briefly visible between the colorful festival stalls.

Edgar, who had quietly observed the conversation from a respectful distance, wandered over carrying another mug of coffee.

"You've met Nora."

"It seems so."

"Good woman."

"You know her?"

"Only as everyone does."

"What does she do?"

"Whatever needs doing."

He nodded toward the Green Valley wagons.

"Some months she's there."

"Other months she's halfway across the country treating farmers, repairing medical equipment, teaching apprentices or helping wherever another pair of hands is useful."

Elias looked once more toward the busy medical tents where Nora had already disappeared into another conversation.

"She seems busy."

Edgar smiled.

"People who are useful usually are."

The festival grew steadily busier as the afternoon unfolded. Every road leading toward Willow Crossing seemed to produce another wagon, another group of cyclists, another family walking together beneath broad straw hats while children hurried ahead toward the music drifting across the village square. Voices blended comfortably with the sounds of turning waterwheels and distant violins until the entire settlement seemed alive with conversation. Elias wandered without destination, allowing curiosity rather than intention to guide him from one display to the next. That had always been his favorite way to discover useful things.

The largest gathering had formed around the booksellers occupying nearly one side of the square. Long shelves built from polished oak stretched beneath wide canvas awnings, their weight supported by thousands of books whose colorful bindings transformed the entire marketplace into something resembling an open-air library. Readers stood shoulder to shoulder, not crowding impatiently but quietly browsing, occasionally smiling to themselves after discovering a familiar author or an unexpected title. Some visitors carried notebooks, carefully copying references before deciding which volumes to purchase.

The elderly bookseller Elias had met the previous evening looked up from arranging another crate.

"I was wondering how long it would take."

"For what?"

"For you to find this place."

Elias smiled.

"It was inevitable."

The old man reached beneath the table and produced a freshly bound volume wrapped carefully in brown paper.

"I set this aside."

Elias unfolded the wrapping.

Industrial Machinery of Northern Europe, Revised Engineering Edition.

He turned several pages. Every illustration had been redrawn with remarkable precision, while handwritten notes from modern engineers filled the margins, correcting old mistakes and suggesting practical improvements discovered during the years after the Reckoning.

"This isn't simply a reprint."

"No."

"The original text survived."

"We expanded it."

"Who?"

"Nearly sixty engineers over the last ten years."

Elias nodded appreciatively.

"It shows."

Nearby another reader held up a thick collection entitled Steam Power and Mechanical Efficiency, while a young woman excitedly leafed through Programming Modern Embedded Systems, already discussing circuit design with the programmer standing beside her.

One entire shelf contained books printed before the Revolution, carefully restored after years spent hidden in private collections, abandoned libraries or forgotten university archives. Their bindings showed varying degrees of age, yet each had been cleaned, repaired and reproduced with remarkable care.

A father stood beside his son examining one particularly worn volume.

"Your grandfather learned from this."

The boy traced a finger across the faded cover.

"Did he own it?"

"No."

"He borrowed it."

"From whom?"

The father smiled.

"Nobody remembers."

"The important thing is that someone preserved it."

The bookseller overheard.

"Knowledge travels farther when nobody locks it away."

Several nearby readers quietly nodded.

Another merchant displayed historical newspapers preserved beneath protective glass. Visitors stopped not to admire politicians or famous personalities but to study photographs showing the first farming cooperatives formed voluntarily after the cities emptied, engineers rebuilding bridges together, villagers restoring hydroelectric stations and librarians rescuing

books from abandoned universities before weather could destroy them. The stories belonged not to rulers but to ordinary people whose names rarely appeared anywhere else. Elias eventually continued toward another section of the festival where a different sound filled the air.

Diesel engines.

A row of machinery stood upon carefully prepared platforms surrounded by curious visitors. Inventors and mechanics adjusted controls while discussing improvements with anyone interested enough to ask questions. There were no ropes separating audience from exhibitors. People walked directly around every machine, examining details, asking technical questions and occasionally offering suggestions of their own.

A broad-shouldered engineer wearing leather overalls stained with graphite stood proudly beside a compact agricultural tractor painted deep forest green.

"We reduced fuel consumption by fourteen percent."

"How?" someone asked.

He smiled.

"Come closer."

Rather than delivering a speech, he lifted the engine cover.

"The combustion chamber."

He pointed toward newly designed injectors.

"And variable timing."

Several mechanics leaned forward immediately.

One elderly farmer scratched his beard.

"Could I fit that to my older engine?"

"Certainly."

"You'll need this adapter."

The engineer handed him a folded set of drawings.

"No charge."

The farmer blinked.

"You've only just met me."

"I'd rather see another machine improved than another drawing sitting on my shelf."

Laughter spread through the gathering.

Nearby another inventor demonstrated a grain separator mounted upon wheels. Instead of requiring three people to operate, the redesigned mechanism could comfortably be managed by one. Across from him a young engineer proudly presented a compact hay baler built almost entirely from locally manufactured components.

Visitors examined every detail.

Questions flowed constantly.

"What bearing size?"

"Where did you source the steel?"

"Can it be adapted for steeper hills?"

"I've solved that problem another way."

"Oh?"

"Come look."

The conversation never became competitive. Every improvement immediately inspired another. Elias spent nearly an hour discussing fuel injectors with two mechanics from Copper Hill before noticing another demonstration drawing an unusually large crowd. An older woman wearing thick welding goggles stood beside an irrigation pump connected to a transparent water tank.

"The impeller has three blades instead of four."

A young engineer frowned.

"Wouldn't that reduce flow?"

"Watch."

She started the motor. Water surged smoothly through the clear pipes.

"Less turbulence."

"Lower power consumption."

Someone behind Elias quietly muttered,

"I never would have thought of that."

The woman heard him.

"Neither did I."

"My granddaughter did."

The crowd laughed warmly. The afternoon drifted onward beneath clear blue skies until another series of voices rose from the northern end of the marketplace. Rows of homemade radios stood upon long wooden tables. Some occupied beautifully polished walnut cabinets while others fit comfortably

inside rugged aluminum cases intended for travel. Foldable antennas leaned against the display, alongside coils of insulated wire, headphones, soldering kits and small electronic modules. Behind the tables stood men and women of every age adjusting tuning knobs with the quiet concentration familiar to anyone who enjoyed radio.

A cheerful older man wearing enormous headphones around his neck waved visitors closer.

"Anyone wishing to build their own transmitter?" Several hands rose immediately.

"Good."

He lifted a small wooden box no larger than a loaf of bread.

"This one reaches nearly eighty kilometers."

Another engineer smiled.

"If the weather behaves."

"It usually doesn't."

More laughter followed. The demonstration began. The operator switched on the transmitter before speaking calmly into a microphone.

"Testing."

Across the square another radio answered almost instantly.

"Loud and clear."

Children looked around in amazement.

"You were over there!"

"We still are."

One little girl tugged her father's sleeve.

"Can we build one?"

"If you promise not to fill the house with wires."

"I can't promise that."

Even the operator laughed. Beside him another enthusiast demonstrated a battery-powered emergency receiver built entirely from locally manufactured components.

"We designed it for travelers."

He looked toward Elias' backpack.

"You probably carry one already."

"I do."

"This version lasts almost three weeks on one charge."

"I'll certainly have a closer look."

Several radio builders had pinned detailed circuit diagrams to display boards. Visitors freely photographed them using digital cameras or copied measurements into notebooks. Nobody objected.

One young programmer stood beside a computer displaying software used to simulate antenna designs before anyone began building them.

"We've made the program available on DVD."

An elderly radio amateur smiled.

"My grandson downloaded it yesterday."

"What does he think?"

"He already found two mistakes."

"Excellent."

"We corrected them this morning."

As the afternoon slowly surrendered to evening, lanterns were lit once more throughout Willow Crossing. Their warm glow reflected from polished brass instruments, varnished furniture and the calm surface of the river flowing beneath the village bridges. The market gradually gave way to another tradition. Merchants covered their goods with canvas while musicians gathered beneath the ancient lindens surrounding the square. More instruments appeared than the night before. Violins, guitars, a clarinet, accordion, cello, double bass and even a beautifully restored upright piano mounted upon a sturdy wagon joined together until the first melody spread gently across the festival.

Without announcement people simply began dancing. Young couples. Grey-haired husbands and wives who had danced together for forty years. Children attempting to imitate their parents. Visitors who had never met one another before the festival. Edgar eventually found Elias standing near the fountain.

"You've avoided dancing remarkably well."

"I repair machines."

"So?"

"They're less likely to laugh."

Edgar grinned.

"I've seen you repair engines."

"I've never seen you trip over one."

Before Elias could answer, someone called Edgar away to settle a discussion about timber drying. He disappeared into another conversation with three carpenters, leaving Elias alone beneath the lanterns.

Across the square Nora stood beside one of the medical wagons, speaking quietly with an elderly woman whose walking stick had lost its rubber tip. After replacing it from a small box of spare parts in her satchel, she accepted nothing in return except a grateful smile. As the older woman walked away more confidently than before, Nora looked toward the musicians beginning another dance.

For a brief moment she noticed Elias watching the gathering. She smiled politely. He returned the gesture with a slight nod. Neither crossed the square. Neither spoke.

The music continued beneath the warm summer sky while conversations drifted through the lantern-lit village until stars gradually appeared above the rooftops. Around them craftsmen discussed new designs, programmers debated software improvements, engineers argued cheerfully over fuel systems, children chased one another between oak trees, and readers sat quietly on benches turning the pages of newly purchased books. The festival carried on without spectacle or ceremony, sustained only by the simple pleasure of people sharing what they had built, learned and preserved with one another before another peaceful day quietly gave way to night.

The music continued long after darkness had settled over Willow Crossing. Lanterns hanging from carved oak posts painted the village square in warm shades of amber, their reflections trembling gently upon the slow-moving river. The musicians no longer needed sheet music. Familiar melodies passed naturally from one instrument to another as though every player had known them since childhood. Couples crossed the open grass beneath the lindens with unhurried steps, sometimes speaking quietly while they danced, sometimes saying nothing at all. Older villagers rested on nearby benches, smiling whenever grandchildren attempted the same dances with considerably more enthusiasm than coordination. Nobody hurried the evening toward an ending. It unfolded at its own comfortable pace, accompanied by laughter, music and the occasional clink of ceramic mugs filled with warm cider.

Elias remained near the edge of the square, watching more than participating. He had always preferred observing people to standing in the center of attention. Around him conversations drifted naturally between subjects. Two programmers debated whether an operating system should remain simple enough for every workshop to repair or become more sophisticated at the cost of complexity. Nearby, a pair of foresters compared the growth rates of different oak varieties planted after the Reckoning. An elderly couple argued

cheerfully over whether hand planes or newer electric planers produced smoother furniture, each refusing to surrender despite forty years of marriage.

The festival continued well into the following morning. Visitors returned to the stalls after breakfast while demonstrations resumed across the square. Elias spent part of the morning browsing another collection of engineering manuals before noticing quiet activity near the Green Valley Medicine wagons. One of the nurses stood beside an insulated refrigeration cabinet whose compressor had clearly fallen silent. Several medicine boxes rested on a nearby table beneath temporary cooling blankets while another nurse carefully monitored the temperature with a digital thermometer.

Nora knelt beside the refrigerator with the rear panel already removed. Several tools lay neatly beside her on a folded cloth.

She looked up as Elias approached.

"I was hoping you'd wander this way."

"You've found something broken."

"I usually do."

She smiled.

"The compressor starts."

"But?"

"It stops after about thirty seconds."

Elias crouched beside the machine.

"May I?"

She moved slightly to one side.

"Please."

He removed the protective cover from the electrical compartment, tracing the wiring carefully with his eyes before reaching into his backpack for a digital multimeter. He checked the incoming voltage, then the relay, the capacitor and finally the thermostat.

"The compressor's healthy."

"I thought so."

He gently tapped a small electronic control board.

"This temperature sensor isn't."

Nora leaned closer.

"Intermittent?"

"It warms slightly."

"Resistance changes."

"The controller thinks the cabinet is cold enough."

She watched while he unsoldered the damaged sensor and replaced it with another from a small compartment inside his tool case.

"You carry refrigerator sensors?"

"I carry many strange things."

She laughed quietly.

"I've noticed."

Within minutes the refrigerator hummed steadily into life.

Cool air flowed gently through the cabinet.

Nora placed her hand inside.

"That's much better."

She looked toward the stacked medicine boxes.

"We were beginning to worry."

"What would you have done?"

"Packed everything into ice chests and borrowed another refrigerator."

"You've planned for failure."

"We always do."

She carefully returned the medicines to their shelves before closing the insulated door.

"I owe you lunch."

"You don't."

"I wasn't asking."

Her expression remained calm, though her eyes carried a hint of amusement.

"There are fresh apples."

"And coffee."

Elias smiled.

"I surrender."

They carried two mugs toward the orchards lying beyond the village. The festival sounds gradually faded behind them until only distant violin music remained, carried softly upon the breeze. Rows of apple trees stretched across gently sloping fields, their branches heavy with fruit that glowed red and gold beneath the afternoon sun. Bees moved lazily between wildflowers growing beneath the trees while narrow grass paths wound quietly through the orchard.

For a while they walked without speaking.

The silence never felt uncomfortable.

Nora eventually broke it.

"Edgar says you've rebuilt engines that most people would have dismantled."

"He exaggerates."

"He says you repaired a milling machine using parts from three different manufacturers."

"That part is true."

She smiled.

"I suspected."

"And Edgar?"

"He exaggerates only when complimenting people."

She laughed softly.

"I've noticed."

They reached a weathered bench overlooking the valley below.

The festival appeared almost miniature from there. Bright awnings dotted the square while music drifted faintly through the warm air.

Nora looked toward the distant rooftops.

"I travel most of the year."

"So I've heard."

"Three or four weeks in one place."

"Then somewhere else."

"How far?"

"This spring I reached the northern lakes."

"And before that?"

"The western vineyards."

"Now here."

"Next month perhaps the eastern settlements."

Elias nodded.

"You've seen more of the country than I have."

"I've probably repaired fewer machines."

"Almost certainly."

She rested one hand upon her medicine satchel.

"Medicine and engineering aren't so different."

"No?"

"We both repair things that stop working."

Elias considered that.

"The parts complain less."

"The patients complain more."

He laughed.

"I'll remember that."

They spoke of refrigeration systems used to preserve vaccines, water purification equipment, small laboratory centrifuges, portable X-ray units powered by battery packs and the challenges of transporting fragile medicines over rough roads. Elias described rebuilding diesel generators for remote workshops while Nora explained how even a simple voltage fluctuation could ruin weeks of carefully prepared medicine.

"It surprises people," she said.

"They think medicine begins with doctors."

"It begins with electricity."

"And refrigeration."

"And clean water."

"And reliable machines."

She looked toward him.

"So thank you."

Elias shook his head gently.

"I only repair them."

"You make it sound small."

"It isn't?"

"No."

She smiled.

"It keeps children alive."

The conversation faded comfortably into silence once more as they continued walking beneath the apple trees. Late that afternoon they returned to the marketplace just as a familiar voice echoed from the center of the square.Jonas had climbed onto the rear platform of his merchant wagon. He held up a small brass bearing scarcely larger than a walnut.

"Attention, friends."

Conversations gradually quieted.

"I've returned from Stone River with news."

Several engineers immediately gathered closer.

Jonas continued.

"Three days ago a survey team exploring the western edge of Blackstone Industrial District discovered an intact storage building beneath one of the old machine halls."

Curious murmurs spread through the crowd.

"They recovered several sealed crates."

He opened a wooden box resting beside him. Inside lay rows of beautifully machined bearings preserved beneath protective grease and waxed paper.

"These were manufactured before the Reckoning."

He lifted one carefully.

"The markings identify them as ultra-precision spindle bearings."

Several machinists exchanged surprised glances. One elderly engineer stepped forward.

"I haven't seen those in thirty years."

Jonas nodded.

"Neither has anyone else."

He carefully returned the bearing to its box.

"The survey team believes hundreds more remain inside."

Another voice called from the crowd.

"What condition?"

"Excellent."

"The building stayed dry."

Someone else asked,

"Why weren't they removed earlier?"

Jonas smiled.

"Because nobody knew they were there."

He unrolled another map.

"The storage building lies beside Machine Shop Number Three."

Elias felt his attention sharpen immediately. The same building. The same sketch Jonas had shown him yesterday. Around him conversations erupted among engineers.

"Imagine rebuilding precision lathes."

"We could reproduce almost anything."

"We'd still need machine tools."

"Perhaps they're there as well."

Jonas raised one hand.

"Remember."

"We're not discussing treasure."

"We're discussing knowledge."

Quiet agreement spread through the gathering. The bearings themselves mattered far less than the machines they might one day restore. Elias looked toward the eastern hills beyond the rooftops of Willow Crossing. Blackstone no longer seemed like an interesting possibility. It had become a place where knowledge still waited beneath decades of silence. He folded the updated map Jonas handed him and slipped it carefully into the document tube inside his backpack.

"I'll leave tomorrow morning," he said quietly.

Jonas smiled.

"I thought you might."

From somewhere behind them Edgar laughed.

"I knew he wouldn't make it through the festival without finding another machine to rescue."

Nora looked toward Elias.

"So you're really going."

"It appears so."

She nodded once.

"Travel safely."

"I intend to."

The evening sun settled slowly toward the western forests while the music resumed across the square. Around them the festival continued with the same peaceful rhythm it had carried all day, but for Elias the quiet roads stretching eastward had already begun calling. Somewhere beyond the forests, beyond Stone River and the abandoned highways, the silent workshops of Blackstone waited beneath layers of dust, holding forgotten machines and careful workmanship that had outlived the world which first created them.

The morning after the festival dawned bright and cool. Much of Willow Crossing still slept beneath a thin veil of mist rising from the river, yet the village was far from silent. Bakers had already begun another day's work, their ovens sending the familiar scent of fresh bread drifting through the empty streets. Somewhere beyond the workshops a rooster greeted the sunrise with unwavering confidence, while the great waterwheel beside the sawmill had already resumed its steady turning. Elias secured the final straps on his backpack, checked the folded map Jonas had given him once more, and stepped quietly into the square where only a handful of merchants were preparing for departure.

Jonas stood beside his wagon tightening the harness on one of the bay horses.

"I had a feeling you wouldn't oversleep."

"I've never managed it."

The merchant smiled.

"I've room beside me if your feet grow tired."

"My feet are still arguing for walking."

"They'll surrender eventually."

Several villagers wandered over to wish them a safe journey. Edgar shook Elias' hand with the firm grip of a man who had spent his life shaping timber.

"If you find anything interesting, don't keep it all to yourself."

"I've never been accused of that."

Lina carried a small cloth bundle wrapped in checked linen.

"My mother insisted."

Elias accepted it.

"What is it?"

"Rye bread, smoked cheese, dried apples and enough biscuits to keep Jonas from eating all your food."

Jonas looked offended.

"I have my own supplies."

"That's exactly what worries everyone."

Laughter followed them out of the village as the wagon rolled slowly eastward beneath the shade of ancient oaks. Elias walked beside the horses rather than climbing aboard immediately, enjoying the quiet rhythm of boots upon gravel while the countryside gradually opened before them. The roads beyond Willow Crossing wound gently between broad meadows where cattle grazed peacefully beneath scattered walnut trees. Fields of barley rippled like water whenever the morning breeze crossed them, while farther away farmers guided compact diesel tractors through orchards heavy with fruit. Every few kilometers another small bridge crossed clear streams whose banks overflowed with wildflowers, reeds and willow trees bending toward the current.

Jonas pointed ahead with the end of his whip.

"By midday we'll reach Glass Lake."

"The optics village."

"The very one."

"I've heard they make the finest lenses in the country."

"They're modest enough to deny it."

"And skilled enough to deserve the praise."

The road gradually climbed into rolling hills before descending toward a valley unlike any Elias had previously visited. Even from a distance the village shimmered in the sunlight. Large windows reflected the blue sky from nearly every building, while dozens of glass roofs sparkled above workshops nestled among carefully tended gardens. A broad lake lay beyond the settlement, its still waters acting like an enormous mirror that doubled the brightness of the afternoon.

At the entrance stood another beautifully carved sign.

Glass Lake

Beneath the village name someone had engraved a simple sentence.

*"Clear vision begins with careful hands."*

The architecture differed entirely from Willow Crossing. Stone walls supported elegant timber frames, but nearly every building incorporated wide north-facing windows that flooded the interiors with steady natural light. Glass skylights covered many workshops, while polished brass ventilation towers rose above the rooftops. Narrow canals carried clean water from the lake through the village, supplying cooling systems for grinding equipment and washing away fine glass dust.

People moved quietly through the streets carrying wooden cases lined with soft cloth rather than sacks of timber or crates of machinery. Many wore protective aprons and lightweight goggles whose interchangeable lenses hung from leather straps around their necks. Their conversations often paused while they held finished lenses toward the sunlight, examining tiny reflections before nodding with quiet satisfaction.

One workshop displayed telescopes aimed toward distant hills. Another specialized entirely in microscopes. Elsewhere visitors examined camera lenses, binoculars, surveying equipment and beautifully polished spectacles arranged upon velvet-lined shelves. Jonas slowed the horses near a broad brick building whose tall windows overlooked the lake.

"We've arrived."

A painted sign above the entrance read:

Glass Lake Precision Optics and Instruments

Inside, the air felt remarkably clean. Fine extraction systems whispered almost silently overhead while rows of grinding machines polished glass blanks with extraordinary precision. Workbenches stood beneath powerful lamps where technicians examined lenses through measuring instruments Elias had never seen before.

The foreman, a tall woman with silver hair gathered neatly beneath a leather cap, greeted Jonas warmly.

"Back already?"

"I've brought someone."

She looked toward Elias.

"The mechanic."

"So I've been told."

She extended her hand.

"I'm Ingrid."

"Elias."

"In perfect time, I hope."

He raised an eyebrow.

"Something broken?"

She sighed with the expression of someone who disliked admitting such things.

"Our primary precision grinder."

She led them deeper into the workshop.

The machine itself occupied the center of a spacious room. Built upon a heavy cast-iron frame isolated from vibrations by massive stone blocks, it carried delicate mechanisms unlike anything Elias had repaired before. Diamond grinding wheels rested beneath transparent protective covers while electronic positioning systems controlled movements measured in thousandths of a millimeter.

"The spindle began vibrating yesterday."

Ingrid folded her arms.

"We shut it down immediately."

"Wise."

"We'd rather lose a day's production than ruin lenses."

Elias removed the front inspection cover. The inside appeared almost spotless. Someone clearly cared for the machine. He rotated the spindle gently. Smooth.

Again.

Almost smooth. Then, barely noticeable, a faint resistance. He reached into his backpack, removing a small inspection mirror, flashlight and dial indicator. After several careful measurements he remained silent for nearly five minutes. Finally he smiled.

"Not the spindle."

Ingrid looked surprised.

"No?"

He pointed toward a drive pulley hidden behind the motor housing.

"This bearing."

She leaned closer.

"It feels fine."

"It almost is."

He removed the bearing housing. One tiny steel roller inside had developed a barely visible flat spot.

"It only complains under load."

"You heard that?"

"I felt it."

Jonas laughed from behind them.

"I've stopped questioning him."

Elias cleaned the housing, replaced the damaged bearing from a spare Jonas happened to carry among his machine parts, adjusted the belt alignment and carefully lubricated every moving surface before closing the covers once again.

"Shall we?"

Ingrid pressed the start button. The motor accelerated smoothly. The spindle gathered speed. The machine settled into an almost silent hum. She watched the vibration monitor. The display remained perfectly steady.

One of the younger technicians whispered,

"I've never seen it that quiet."

Ingrid rested one hand upon the cast-iron frame.

"Neither have I."

She turned toward Elias.

"You've saved us several weeks."

"I only replaced one bearing."

"You understood which one."

While several technicians immediately resumed grinding glass blanks, an elderly man emerged slowly from a side office carrying a notebook beneath one arm. He moved with deliberate care, leaning lightly upon a polished walnut walking stick whose brass ferrule clicked softly against the stone floor. His long brown mechanic's apron hung over a grey wool shirt rolled neatly at the sleeves, and leather protectors covered his forearms where years of machining had left faint burn marks. Thick silver hair framed a thoughtful face, while a pair of brass calipers protruded from the apron pocket as naturally as another man might carry a pen.

He studied the now-silent grinder for a moment before looking toward Elias.

"So."

His voice carried neither surprise nor excitement.

"You listen to machines before you repair them."

Elias nodded.

"They usually explain the problem."

The old engineer smiled almost imperceptibly.

"Most people only hear the noise."

He extended his hand.

"My name is Otto."

"I've read your letters," Elias replied.

"And I've heard rather a great deal about your workshop."

Otto's eyes wandered briefly toward the backpack resting beside the repaired machine.

"I suspect," he said quietly, "that our conversation about Blackstone should begin before someone else discovers how much is still waiting there."

Here's the next combined section, continuing the novel in the same style.

Otto closed the notebook resting beneath his arm and looked through the workshop window toward the eastern hills where the afternoon sun was already beginning its slow descent. For several moments he remained silent, as though arranging old memories before speaking them aloud. Finally he nodded once, more to himself than to anyone else.

"I'll come with you."

Elias looked at him.

"I thought you preferred your workshop."

"I do."

Otto smiled faintly.

"But there are some places a man ought to visit one last time before he's too old to climb broken staircases."

Jonas folded his map across the workbench.

"You know Blackstone better than anyone alive."

"I knew it."

Otto corrected him gently.

"It has probably changed as much as I have."

Within an hour preparations had begun. Ingrid insisted on packing several precision measuring instruments wrapped carefully in padded leather cases.

"If those machine tools truly survived," she said, "someone should measure them properly before anyone tries moving them."

Otto gathered only a modest amount of luggage. His old leather satchel contained notebooks, calipers polished by decades of use, a folding magnifier, pencils sharpened with almost obsessive care, and three engineering manuals whose pages had become soft from constant reading. He carried no unnecessary weight.

"You aren't bringing spare clothes?" Jonas asked.

Otto looked genuinely puzzled.

"I've already got clothes."

Jonas laughed.

"You've not changed at all."

By late afternoon the wagon rolled eastward once again. Elias walked beside it while Otto occupied the front seat with Jonas, the three men talking easily as the countryside unfolded around them. Forests alternated with cultivated valleys where orchards stretched toward distant hills. Here and there they passed workshops powered by small hydroelectric stations or compact wind turbines. Every settlement they encountered bore its own unmistakable character.

As evening approached they stopped beside a quiet stream bordered by birch trees whose white trunks glowed softly beneath the fading sunlight. Jonas unharnessed the horses while Elias gathered fallen branches for a small cooking fire. Otto settled comfortably upon a weathered log and produced one of the engineering books from his satchel.

"What are you reading?" Elias asked.

Otto turned the cover toward him.

"Machine Tool Design."

"The original edition?"

"The third revision."

Elias sat beside him.

"I've only seen digital copies."

"They're useful."

Otto gently turned another page.

"But books teach differently."

The illustrations had been drawn entirely by hand. Every bolt, bearing, gear and cutting surface had been shaded with remarkable precision. Small handwritten corrections filled the margins where generations of engineers had added practical improvements discovered long after the book had first been printed.

Otto smiled.

"Do you know why I still carry this?"

Elias shook his head.

"Because the author admitted his mistakes."

He pointed toward one paragraph.

"Read that."

Elias smiled as he reached the sentence.

*"This bearing arrangement appears satisfactory. If future engineers discover a better method, I hope they will ignore my pride and improve it."*

"That," Otto said quietly, "is how useful people write."

Jonas stirred the stew hanging above the fire.

"The old world had clever engineers."

"It certainly did."

Otto closed the book gently.

"It also buried many of them beneath management."

The conversation wandered through forgotten manufacturing techniques, restored libraries, early computer-controlled machine tools and modern workshops that had quietly surpassed many pre-Reckoning designs by exchanging improvements freely rather than hiding them behind patents.

Before sleeping, Otto looked toward the stars appearing above the dark forest.

"I was twenty-three when I first entered Blackstone."

"And?"

"I thought no factory could ever be larger."

He smiled to himself.

"I wonder what remains."

The following afternoon the forests gradually gave way to something altogether different.

The road widened unexpectedly.

Cracked concrete emerged beneath thin layers of gravel.

Rusting railway tracks crossed their path before disappearing beneath dense vegetation. Enormous electricity pylons marched across distant hills, their cables long since removed, leaving only silent steel skeletons standing against the sky.

Jonas slowed the horses.

"We're close."

The first abandoned warehouses appeared among the trees.

Nature had spent three decades reclaiming them. Ivy climbed walls once hidden beneath painted company logos. Young birch trees pushed confidently through cracked loading docks. Thick moss covered entire sections of concrete roofs while vines disappeared into shattered office windows whose broken glass had long ago fallen into the grass below.

The silence differed from that of the countryside.

It carried weight.

Every building seemed to remember thousands of workers who would never return.

Otto removed his hat.

"I recognize that chimney."

He pointed toward a massive brick smokestack rising above the forest canopy.

"It belonged to the steel foundry."

Another kilometer brought them to the edge of Blackstone itself.

The factory district stretched farther than Elias had imagined possible.

Building after building disappeared into the distance, connected by overhead walkways, abandoned railway sidings and broad service roads now covered with waist-high grass. Great gantry cranes stood frozen where their operators had left them thirty-two years earlier. Water towers reflected afternoon sunlight through rust-streaked steel. Rows of broken windows glittered like scattered ice beneath the pale sky.

Jonas secured the horses inside a concealed grove while the three men continued on foot.

"Machine Shop Three lies beyond those warehouses," Otto said quietly.

The entrance doors stood partly open.

Someone had forced them years before.

Inside, sunlight streamed through broken skylights, illuminating enormous machines standing exactly where their operators had last left them. Conveyor belts remained loaded with unfinished components. Tool cabinets still lined the walls. Dust covered every surface, yet beneath it waited precision built to survive generations.

Nobody spoke.

Even Jonas lowered his voice instinctively.

The only sound came from distant pigeons nesting somewhere high among the roof trusses.

Otto walked slowly between silent machining centers.

"I remember this."

He touched one cast-iron column almost affectionately.

"They installed it six months before everything ended."

Elias examined another machine whose controls remained astonishingly complete.

"No vandalism."

"Very little."

Otto nodded.

"Most people came here searching for tools."

"They couldn't move machines weighing twenty tonnes."

The deeper they walked into the factory, the more extraordinary the discoveries became. Entire racks of untouched cutting tools. Precision measuring instruments still resting inside velvet-lined drawers. Boxes of hardened steel blanks. Technical drawings stored inside metal cabinets. Finally they reached a broad section screened behind heavy canvas curtains that had somehow survived decades of darkness.

Otto pulled one aside. His breath caught. There, resting upon vibration-isolated foundations beneath a thick layer of dust, stood a magnificent precision lathe unlike anything Elias had ever seen. Its cast-iron bed stretched nearly six meters long. Every polished guideway remained coated beneath dried protective grease. Brass identification plates still gleamed beneath the dust. The controls looked almost untouched.

Elias knelt beside the carriage.

"No corrosion."

He gently wiped away a section of grease. The steel beneath reflected light like a mirror. Otto removed his spectacles.

"I thought they'd dismantled it."

"They never had the chance."

Elias slowly turned the handwheel. The carriage moved. Smoothly. Without resistance.

"It still works."

Otto laughed quietly.

"I don't believe it."

Nearby stood locked drawing cabinets. Jonas forced one open with a pry bar. Inside rested hundreds of carefully rolled engineering drawings protected inside waxed paper tubes.

Machine assemblies, spindle designs, hydraulic systems.

Elias carefully selected several bundles.

"We can't carry everything."

"No."

Otto answered.

"But we can return."

At that moment the silence shattered.A rifle shot cracked through the factory.Concrete splintered beside Jonas' shoulder.

"Down!"

Elias threw himself behind the enormous lathe as another shot echoed through the hall. Dust burst from a steel column where the bullet struck.

"Upper offices!" Jonas shouted.

Three armed figures emerged along a rusted overhead walkway nearly thirty meters away. Their clothing consisted of scavenged military jackets reinforced with welded scrap metal, motorcycle shoulder guards and patched leather pieces tied together with wire and belts. One wore a faded riot helmet, another an old gas mask whose cracked lenses reflected the light from broken skylights.

"You don't belong here!" one of them shouted.

"This factory belongs to the Restoration Council!"

Otto snorted quietly behind cover.

"They've promoted themselves."

Another rifle barked.

The bullet ricocheted harmlessly from the cast-iron lathe.

Elias calmly loaded two shells into the shotgun.

"They've got height."

Jonas nodded.

"But poor cover."

Elias glanced upward. Steel support columns divided the hall every ten meters.

"If I reach that staircase..."

"I'll keep them occupied."

Jonas drew his pistol. The first careful shot struck the railing beside one attacker's hands, forcing him backward. Not to hit. To distract. Elias moved immediately. He sprinted low between two enormous milling machines before dropping behind another row of equipment as bullets shattered dusty windows overhead.

"They're trying to pin us!"

Otto called.

"They're wasting ammunition."

Elias reached the staircase unnoticed.

One hostile figure leaned over the railing searching for him. The shotgun roared. The blast struck the man's shoulder and upper chest at close range. He was thrown backward into the rusted handrail, blood spraying across the concrete wall before he collapsed without another movement.

The remaining two spun toward the staircase. Jonas fired again. One bullet struck a rifle barrel, throwing the shooter's aim wide as another shot blasted harmlessly into the ceiling. Elias climbed quickly. The second attacker appeared only a few meters away. He raised his weapon too slowly. The shotgun fired again.

The heavy buckshot struck him across the torso and neck, tearing through improvised armor as he staggered sideways into the railing. Blood spread rapidly across his patched jacket before he toppled over the edge, crashing onto the factory floor below amid twisted metal and broken timber. The last gunman fled deeper along the walkway.

"Fall back!" he shouted desperately.

"No!"

Another voice echoed from somewhere unseen.

"We hold this place!"

Elias switched to his pistol while advancing carefully.

Every doorway.

Every corner.

Every shadow.

Years repairing abandoned machinery had taught him that entering unknown buildings demanded patience long before it required courage. The final attacker suddenly emerged from behind a control cabinet. He fired wildly. The bullet struck a steel beam only centimeters from Elias. Elias answered with two controlled shots. The first struck the man's thigh, spinning him sideways. The second hit his chest.

He collapsed heavily against the rusting machinery, the rifle slipping from blood-covered hands before clattering across the walkway. Silence returned almost immediately. Only drifting dust moved beneath the broken skylights. Jonas climbed slowly onto the walkway.

"They're finished."

Otto looked sadly toward the fallen men.

"They chose ghosts over fields."

Nobody celebrated.

Elias quietly collected the scattered engineering drawings before glancing toward the enormous precision lathe one last time.

"We know where it is now."

Otto nodded.

"And next time..."

He carefully rolled another drawing into its protective tube.

"...we won't come alone."

Outside, the abandoned factory disappeared once more into silence as the three men withdrew through the towering doors, carrying with them not treasure, but knowledge that had survived long enough to begin another life beyond the ruins.

## Return to civilization

The return journey felt different from the road that had carried them toward Blackstone. The wagon moved at the same steady pace, the forests whispered with the same wind through the pines, and the rivers still reflected the broad summer sky, yet the carefully packed wooden crates resting beneath canvas in Jonas' wagon changed every conversation. Inside them lay precision bearings wrapped in waxed paper, several measuring instruments, and, most valuable of all, dozens of engineering drawings rescued from the abandoned factory before the remaining fanatics could destroy them. Otto occasionally rested one hand upon the crates as though reassuring himself they had not vanished during the night.

They stopped at settlements they had passed only days before. Every village greeted them with the familiar rhythm of ordinary life. Blacksmiths worked

beneath open sheds where sparks drifted lazily into the afternoon air. Farmers repaired fences while children carried baskets filled with berries gathered from nearby forests. Waterwheels turned beside flour mills, and compact diesel tractors rolled steadily through wheat fields already beginning to change from green to gold. The roads remained busy with merchants, doctors, mechanics and craftsmen whose journeys connected the countryside like countless threads woven into one great fabric.

Word of their return traveled surprisingly quickly. By the time they reached Glass Lake, several engineers already waited outside the optics workshop.

"Ingrid received your radio message," one of them said before Jonas had even climbed down from the wagon.

"We were hoping it was true."

Otto carefully lifted one of the drawing tubes.

"It is."

No celebration followed.

Instead, everyone quietly carried the rescued drawings into the workshop before spreading them across a broad drafting table beneath bright north-facing windows. Engineers gathered around without crowding one another. Nobody reached immediately for ownership or personal credit. They simply began reading.

One blueprint showed the spindle assembly of the great precision lathe. Another detailed bearing housings machined to tolerances finer than anyone had produced since the years before the Reckoning. A third contained manufacturing procedures written in remarkably clear language.

One younger machinist looked up.

"We can build this."

Otto smiled.

"Not today."

"But one day."

The room fell comfortably silent again as pencils began tracing copies onto fresh drafting paper. Several people measured dimensions while others discussed steel grades that local foundries could already produce. Before evening arrived, three duplicate sets had already been completed.

"We never keep only one copy," Ingrid said while carefully rolling another blueprint.

"Fire."

"Flood."

"Simple accidents."

"They've destroyed enough libraries already."

The following morning Elias accompanied several machinists into the precision workshop. At the center stood a modern lathe built after the Reckoning, already an excellent machine by every practical measure. Now it would become even better.

The rescued bearing housing drawing had revealed a small improvement almost overlooked by everyone except Otto. The original designers had modified the lubrication channels to distribute oil more evenly at high rotational speeds, reducing both wear and operating temperature.

"It seems almost insignificant," one apprentice observed.

Otto shook his head gently.

"Machines rarely become extraordinary through one great invention."

He pointed toward the drawing.

"They improve because someone cared enough about details."

The original bearing housing rested upon the workbench beside a newly machined steel blank. Elias carefully aligned the cutting tools while another machinist checked dimensions using precision gauges.

The machine began working.

The cutting tool advanced steadily across the spinning steel, producing long ribbons of bright metal that curled gracefully into waiting trays. Coolant flowed continuously across the cutting edge while digital readouts displayed measurements accurate to thousandths of a millimeter.

Several apprentices watched without speaking.

When the final pass had been completed, Elias lifted the finished component carefully from the chuck.

Otto measured it. Once. Then again. He smiled quietly.

"It matches."

The improved bearing housing was assembled into the spindle before everyone gathered once more around the machine.

Ingrid pressed the start button. The motor accelerated smoothly. The spindle gathered speed. Then more speed. Everyone listened. Almost nothing. Only the gentle whisper of bearings turning beneath perfect alignment. One apprentice frowned.

"Is it running?"

Otto rested two fingers lightly against the casting.

"It certainly is."

The machine continued operating almost silently. Several engineers exchanged satisfied smiles. No speeches followed. No applause.

Only notebooks opening as observations were carefully recorded for the next workshop that would eventually reproduce the same improvement.

Three days later, while Elias and Jonas continued southward toward Green Valley, a familiar voice emerged from the portable radio attached to Elias' backpack. The little receiver crackled briefly before settling into a clear transmission.

"Good evening. This is River Junction Community Radio broadcasting on forty-three point seven megahertz."

Soft violin music played for a few moments before another announcer continued.

"Our first report concerns an encouraging piece of engineering news from Glass Lake."

Jonas smiled.

"Listen."

The announcer spoke without excitement or exaggeration.

"Travelling engineers recently returned from Blackstone Industrial District carrying preserved technical drawings and several precision machine components recovered from one of the abandoned workshops."

A brief pause followed.

"Engineers at Glass Lake have already reproduced one spindle bearing housing described in the recovered documentation. Initial testing indicates noticeably improved stability and reduced vibration in high-precision grinding equipment."

Another voice joined the broadcast.

"We spoke this morning with engineer Ingrid Holm."

Her calm voice emerged from the speaker.

"No miracle has occurred."

"We simply inherited careful work from people who came before us."

"Our task is to understand it, improve it if we can, and pass it forward again."

The announcer continued.

"Copies of the recovered engineering drawings will become available through regional workshops during the coming months. Settlements wishing to participate in reproduction or testing are encouraged to contact Glass Lake through their usual merchant routes or community radio frequencies."

The broadcast moved naturally onward. Weather forecasts. Harvest reports. A request for replacement water-pump seals. Several folk songs performed by musicians from Willow Crossing. Then the familiar closing words.

"Build well."

"Travel safely."

"Good night."

Jonas switched the radio off.

"I like the way they report things."

"They report work."

"Not heroes."

The road gradually entered another fertile valley where broad medicinal gardens spread across gentle hillsides in carefully ordered rows. Wooden signs identified lavender, chamomile, digitalis, mint, echinacea, valerian and dozens of other medicinal plants growing beneath the summer sun. Beyond them stood several long brick buildings with whitewashed walls, broad ventilation towers and remarkably clean courtyards connected by stone pathways lined with flowering herbs.

A carved oak sign welcomed visitors.

Green Valley Medicine Cooperative.

Another inscription beneath it read simply:

"Health belongs to everyone willing to preserve it."

Several delivery wagons stood waiting near covered loading platforms while workers carefully transferred insulated containers into padded wooden crates. Unlike ordinary market settlements, the atmosphere remained notably quieter. People spoke softly, not because anyone demanded it, but because concentration naturally accompanied the work performed there.

Nora appeared outside one of the laboratories carrying a stack of neatly labeled glass bottles.

She noticed Elias almost immediately.

"You survived Blackstone."

"So did the drawings."

She smiled.

"I heard."

"The radio travels faster than merchants."

"It usually does."

She placed the bottles carefully into a padded transport crate before walking beside him toward the production buildings.

"You wanted to see how we make medicines."

"I've been curious."

"Then come."

The first building resembled a cross between a laboratory and a precision engineering workshop. Every floor had been scrubbed until the polished concrete reflected the afternoon light entering through tall windows. Stainless steel tables stood in perfectly ordered rows, each holding carefully arranged glassware, electronic balances, measuring cylinders and microscopes. Workers wore clean cotton coats, protective gloves and transparent safety glasses while quietly discussing measurements or recording observations into computers positioned beside each workstation.

Nothing felt hurried.

Nothing felt improvised.

In one room technicians prepared sterile nutrient solutions beneath filtered airflow cabinets where even the movement of air had been carefully controlled. Nearby another group monitored stainless steel fermentation vessels whose digital displays recorded temperature, pressure and oxygen content with quiet precision. Transparent pipes connected processing equipment polished so thoroughly that every fitting reflected the overhead lights.

Nora led Elias toward another hall where compact tablet presses operated steadily beside capsule-filling machines designed and built locally.

"We manufacture only what people actually need."

She picked up a bottle from a finished batch.

"Antibiotics."

Nearby stood insulin prepared inside refrigerated production rooms supplied continuously by diesel generators and battery storage systems. Other sections produced pain relief medicines, antiseptics, vaccines, intravenous fluids and

carefully standardized herbal extracts whose effectiveness had been verified repeatedly rather than accepted through tradition alone.

Every batch received identification numbers. Every production step was documented. Every sample underwent laboratory testing before release. Elias watched one technician compare measurements from two electronic analyzers.

"You test everything twice?"

The technician looked up from the display.

"Usually three times."

"And if the results disagree?"

"We don't sell it."

Nora nodded toward shelves filled with thick record books and local computer terminals.

"Every settlement receiving medicine can trace exactly when it was produced, who tested it and which ingredients were used."

A merchant loading insulated containers onto his wagon overheard them.

"I've been coming here for fifteen years."

He gently secured another crate beneath thick blankets.

"I've never once returned a defective bottle."

Outside, rows of flowering medicinal plants swayed gently beneath the afternoon breeze while bees moved patiently from blossom to blossom. Beyond the gardens, mechanics serviced delivery vehicles, programmers updated laboratory software, glassmakers unloaded newly manufactured medicine bottles and carpenters repaired transport crates worn smooth by thousands of kilometers of peaceful roads.

Elias looked across the settlement where science, engineering, farming and careful workmanship blended so naturally that no single trade appeared more important than another.

Nora adjusted the strap of her medicine satchel before looking toward the departing merchant wagons.

"They'll reach six valleys before the week ends."

Elias watched the convoy roll slowly onto the sunlit road.

"And by next month," he said, "someone will probably have found another way to improve the work."

Nora smiled.

"I hope so."

"So do I."

Nora watched another medicine wagon disappear down the eastern road before returning the ledger to its shelf. Two younger nurses were already discussing the next week's deliveries while technicians prepared another batch of antibiotics inside the laboratory. The settlement moved with its usual quiet confidence, every person already occupied by work that needed doing. She remained standing in the courtyard for a moment before turning toward Elias.

"How far east are you going?"

"At least until Blackstone again."

"And after that?"

"I haven't decided."

She smiled slightly.

"Good."

He looked at her curiously.

"Why is that good?"

"Because neither have I."

She adjusted the strap of her familiar leather medicine satchel.

"Our next delivery caravan doesn't leave for another three weeks. Helena has already agreed to take my route."

"You want to travel?"

"I've been looking at medicine cabinets and laboratory walls for months."

"You've earned a few roads."

Nora laughed softly.

"I was hoping you'd say that."

Within an hour her preparations were complete. Unlike most travelers she packed remarkably little. Two changes of clothing disappeared into a compact canvas pack together with several notebooks, a folding microscope, medical instruments, sterile dressings, antibiotics, pain medication, vaccines packed inside insulated containers and a carefully maintained portable refrigerator powered by interchangeable battery packs. A compact solar panel rolled tightly beneath the backpack, while a small revolver rested inside a leather holster beneath her travelling coat. It was clean, well maintained and clearly carried from necessity rather than affection.

"You shoot?" Elias asked.

"When absolutely necessary."

"Often?"

She shook her head.

"Twice."

"I'd prefer never needing a third."

Jonas climbed onto the wagon.

"I've travelled with doctors before."

He smiled toward Nora.

"They usually bring more medicine than clothes."

"We're difficult to persuade otherwise."

The wagon rolled gently away from Green Valley beneath another clear summer morning. The valley gradually disappeared behind orchards and medicinal gardens while open countryside stretched ahead. Their days soon settled into a comfortable rhythm. They travelled during the cool hours of morning, stopped whenever someone along the road needed assistance, shared meals beneath trees or beside quiet rivers, and reached another village before darkness whenever possible.

The conversations came naturally.

Sometimes they spoke for hours.

Sometimes they walked half a morning without either feeling obliged to interrupt the silence.

Nora became fascinated by workshops wherever they stopped. She watched blacksmiths rebuild ploughs, programmers update milling machines, radio enthusiasts improve transmitters and mechanics repair diesel engines, other machines were built when necessary and components produced locally. Elias, meanwhile, found himself asking questions about medicine he had never previously considered.

"How long does insulin last?"

"Depends on temperature."

"And if refrigeration fails?"

"We improvise."

"How?"

"Ice houses."

"Deep wells."

"Mountain streams."

"Anything that buys time until someone repairs the refrigerator."

She smiled toward him.

"Usually someone wearing brass goggles."

Elias laughed quietly.

"And what if he isn't nearby?"

"We repair it ourselves."

She had become accustomed to the sight of him stopping whenever some unfamiliar machine caught his attention. A broken water pump beside a farmhouse might delay them twenty minutes. A damaged grain separator could occupy half an afternoon. Nora never complained. More often she sat nearby reading while Elias worked, occasionally handing him whichever tool he was searching for before he had asked.

"You've done this before," he remarked one afternoon.

"My father repaired clocks."

"So that's where it comes from."

"I spent half my childhood handing him screwdrivers."

"And the other half?"

"Taking clocks apart when he wasn't looking."

They both laughed.

Several evenings found them camping far from any village. One afternoon dark clouds gathered unexpectedly above the western hills until steady rain began falling across the countryside. Jonas guided the wagon beneath a grove of ancient oaks while Elias and Nora quickly stretched a canvas shelter between the trees. Rain drummed steadily upon the waxed fabric as cool mist drifted through the forest.

The horses stood contentedly beneath another shelter, quietly chewing hay while Jonas prepared supper over a small sheltered stove. Soon the smell of vegetable stew and fresh coffee mingled with the scent of wet earth, pine needles and wood smoke.

The rain continued long after darkness settled.

Beyond the little circle of firelight the forest disappeared into blackness while thousands of raindrops whispered through the leaves overhead.

Jonas eventually retired to his wagon, leaving Elias and Nora sitting beside the fire with steaming mugs warming their hands.

For several minutes they simply listened to the rain.

Nora finally broke the silence.

"When I was little I thought rain sounded different in every forest."

"And now?"

"I still think so."

Elias smiled.

"My grandfather used to say workshops had different sounds too."

"They do."

"You can tell a healthy engine before opening the cover."

She looked into the flames.

"My mother never understood how Father and I could hear tiny differences inside machines."

"My mother couldn't either."

Another comfortable silence settled between them. The fire crackled gently. Rain continued falling beyond the shelter. Nora looked toward the darkness.

"Do you ever think about the world before?"

"Sometimes."

"What do you imagine?"

He considered the question.

"Mostly noise."

"So many people."

"So many cars."

"So many buildings."

She nodded slowly.

"I've treated people who still remember."

"And?"

"They never miss the governments."

"No."

"They usually miss one or two people."

The firelight reflected quietly in both their eyes before the conversation drifted elsewhere, toward favorite books, old radios, forgotten railway lines and the curious satisfaction of repairing something another person had almost given up on.

Two days later they reached a broad river where several merchants had gathered beside a movable steel bridge spanning the current. One side of the bridge remained raised while three mechanics examined a large gearbox mounted within the lifting mechanism.

A familiar face waved enthusiastically.

"Perfect timing!"

Elias recognized Viktor immediately.

"What happened?"

"The bridge won't lower."

One mechanic pointed toward the exposed machinery.

"The lifting motor works."

"The gearbox doesn't."

Several merchant wagons waited patiently beneath nearby trees while children skipped stones across the river. Nobody appeared irritated by the delay.

Elias climbed onto the machinery platform.

Within minutes Nora had already unpacked tools beside him without either of them speaking.

"You know exactly what I'll need."

"I'm beginning to."

The gearbox came apart surprisingly quickly. One large bronze key securing the drive gear had sheared cleanly, allowing the shaft to rotate without moving the bridge.

"We'll have to machine another."

Viktor scratched his head.

"We haven't a workshop."

Elias looked around thoughtfully.

"We don't need one."

He examined the broken pieces before selecting a section of bronze bar carried among Jonas' supplies.

Three hours later, using little more than hand tools, careful filing and remarkable patience, the new key slid perfectly into place.

The bridge descended slowly across the river.

Waiting wagons crossed one after another while their drivers thanked the small group of mechanics. One elderly merchant shook Elias' hand.

"I've waited half a day."

He smiled warmly.

"It was worth it."

Before the caravan departed he reached into his satchel.

"I nearly forgot."

He handed Elias a thick envelope whose paper had become dusty from many kilometers of travel.

"This has been chasing you for almost a week."

The handwriting looked immediately familiar.

Helena.

The librarian.

Elias carefully unfolded the letter while Nora stood quietly beside him. Helena's neat handwriting filled several pages. Most concerned newly restored engineering books arriving from abandoned university archives.

Then, halfway through the second page, another paragraph caught his attention.

*"Last month two surveyors visited the library searching for maps. They had been exploring the northern highlands and claimed to have discovered a research station almost completely hidden beneath landslides and forest growth. They entered only the upper levels before turning back because several heavy security doors remained sealed and they lacked proper equipment. One of them mentioned seeing laboratories, machine rooms and what appeared to be technical archives untouched since before the Reckoning. I immediately thought of you, Otto and Jonas. If the report proves accurate, the place deserves careful exploration before weather or careless scavengers destroy what remains."*

Helena had enclosed a rough map showing the approximate location together with several notes copied from the surveyors' journals.

Nora looked over his shoulder.

"A research station."

"It seems so."

Jonas folded the map thoughtfully.

"We were heading east."

Otto would certainly want to see this, Elias thought as he carefully returned the letter to its envelope.

Beyond the bridge the northern road disappeared into distant mountains where dark forests covered forgotten valleys that few travellers visited anymore. Somewhere among those hills another piece of the old world appeared to have survived quietly beneath stone and trees, waiting for patient hands to uncover it.

The repaired bridge disappeared behind them as the road gradually turned northward. The country changed almost imperceptibly with every passing kilometer. Broad agricultural valleys gave way to rolling hills where forests grew denser and rivers ran colder over polished granite. The air itself felt different, carrying the crisp scent of mountain streams, spruce and damp stone instead of warm wheat fields and orchards. Elias walked beside Jonas' wagon while Nora occasionally climbed down to collect unfamiliar alpine herbs growing along the roadside, carefully placing each specimen into a notebook with brief handwritten observations.

"The mountains preserve things," she said while examining a small flowering plant.

"People?"

"Sometimes."

"Buildings?"

"Often."

"The cold slows everything."

Otto nodded from the wagon seat.

"So does isolation."

They crossed several narrow bridges spanning deep ravines where white water crashed over ancient rocks before disappearing beneath dense forests. The roads remained remarkably well maintained despite the difficult terrain. Here and there small crews worked quietly replacing timber guardrails, repairing culverts or clearing fallen trees. Nobody supervised them beyond the practical need to finish the work itself. Travelers passing in either direction usually stopped for a few minutes, offering another pair of hands before continuing on their own journeys.

Late on the second afternoon the mountains opened into a broad plateau unlike any settlement Elias had previously visited. Long brick workshops with enormous north-facing windows stood beside modern buildings covered with solar panels. Small wind turbines turned lazily above several rooftops while insulated cables connected nearly every structure through underground conduits. Wide ventilation towers rose above the larger workshops, their quiet fans carrying away the heat produced by hundreds of computers working inside.

A polished steel sign stood beside the entrance road.

North Bridge Computing Works

Beneath it another line had been engraved into brushed aluminum.

"Good software is repaired as often as good machinery."

Jonas smiled.

"I always enjoy stopping here."

The village possessed a character entirely its own. Instead of the scent of fresh timber or machine oil, the air carried the faint smell of warm electronics, solder, fresh coffee and newly printed books. People walked through the streets carrying computer cases, keyboards, rolled electrical drawings and stacks of DVDs packed inside protective sleeves. Many wore practical work clothes fitted with dozens of small pockets filled with screwdrivers, memory modules, circuit boards and measuring probes. Copper-framed reading glasses rested upon many foreheads while compact oscilloscopes occupied benches outside several workshops where engineers discussed circuits beneath shaded porches.

Even the architecture reflected the settlement's specialty. Every workshop featured broad windows allowing generous natural light onto electronics benches. Large battery storage rooms occupied nearly every building, while rooftop solar panels quietly supplied much of the settlement's electricity during clear weather. Thick fiber-optic cables connected laboratories, programming workshops and testing facilities through a fast local network that had gradually expanded over many years.

A familiar face greeted Jonas before the horses had fully stopped.

"You've arrived exactly on schedule."

Jonas climbed down smiling.

"I've been accused of many things."

"Punctuality isn't usually one of them."

The young engineer laughed before extending a hand toward Elias.

"I'm Martin."

"Elias."

"The mechanic from Glass Lake?"

"The same."

"And Nora."

He nodded politely toward her.

"Your medical refrigeration software update worked beautifully."

She smiled.

"I'll tell the programmers."

Martin led them through one of the largest workshops. Instead of lathes and milling machines, rows of sturdy wooden desks filled the spacious room. Modern desktop computers occupied nearly every workstation, their monitors displaying engineering drawings, lines of programming code, electronic circuit diagrams and three-dimensional machine models. Conversations drifted comfortably through the room as programmers occasionally stood to compare solutions before returning to their keyboards.

Nobody worked in silence.

Neither did anyone shout. The atmosphere resembled a large engineering workshop more than an office. One young woman looked up from her screen.

"Martin."

"The simulation finally works."

He walked over immediately. The monitor displayed a virtual hydraulic system powering an agricultural machine.

"You solved the pressure oscillation?"

She smiled proudly.

"It was one missing calculation."

Another programmer laughed from across the room.

"It's always one missing calculation."

Near another window several people copied software onto neatly labeled DVDs arranged inside transparent cases. Agricultural Workshop Suite, Engineering CAD 2081, Bridge Load Calculator, Hydroelectric Control System.

Several children stood nearby excitedly examining newly released games.

"I've heard this one has airplanes."

"No."

"They're gliders."

"That's even better."

Another boy held up a different case.

"My brother says this strategy game lets you build an entire river transport network."

A programmer overheard him.

"Version two does."

"When?"

"Probably next month."

The children exchanged delighted smiles.

Nearby several engineers gathered around another table exchanging DVDs almost as naturally as merchants traded machine parts. Someone exchanged a memory stick with all of old worlds books on it, since the times of internet and pirates.

"I've improved the gearbox simulation."

"I'll give you the latest electrical library."

"I've translated the interface into three more languages."

One elderly programmer looked toward Elias.

"We've also updated the workshop control package."

"What changed?"

"It now supports multiple machine controllers."

Martin gestured toward another building.

"Come."

The adjoining workshop sounded far more familiar. Electric motors hummed steadily while milling machines, lathes and drill presses worked behind transparent safety screens. Yet something immediately caught Elias' attention.

No operator stood beside one of the larger milling machines.

Instead, the machine moved with slow, deliberate precision, cutting a complex aluminum component exactly as displayed upon a nearby computer monitor.

Martin smiled.

"We've been expecting that expression."

Elias walked around the machine carefully.

"CNC."

"Our own design."

"No imported controllers?"

"None."

He opened a cabinet beneath the machine.

Inside rested several compact electronic modules mounted neatly upon aluminum rails. Every circuit board carried handwritten labels identifying the local workshop that had produced it.

"Processors from Glass Lake."

"Motor drivers from Copper Hill."

"Software written here."

"The mechanics helped design the interface."

A programmer sitting nearby rolled his chair over.

"The idea wasn't to replace machinists."

He pointed toward the screen.

"The machinist still decides every measurement."

"The computer only repeats the movements accurately."

Elias watched the cutter complete another perfect pass before changing tools automatically.

"If something breaks?"

The programmer shrugged.

"We repair it."

"No hidden systems."

"No locked software."

He opened the control program on the monitor.

Every line of source code remained completely accessible.

"Anyone may improve it."

"If they discover something better, we release another version."

Otto examined the machine thoughtfully.

"It reminds me of Blackstone."

Martin nodded.

"We studied those recovered drawings."

"Several bearing improvements are already included."

Elias smiled.

"So Blackstone has already begun working again."

"In a way."

Across the workshop another automated machine carefully drilled a series of perfectly aligned holes into steel brackets destined for bridge construction. Nearby a compact robotic arm loaded small aluminum components into an inspection station before placing finished parts into neatly organized trays. None of the machines worked particularly quickly. Instead, they worked with quiet consistency, freeing skilled machinists to design, inspect and improve rather than repeat the same operation all day.

A young apprentice adjusted a digital drawing before sending it to another milling machine.

"Watch this."

The cutter began moving.

Within moments fresh aluminum chips curled away beneath precisely controlled movements.

The apprentice smiled.

"My grandfather says this would have amazed people before the Revolution."

Otto quietly folded his arms.

"It wouldn't."

The apprentice looked surprised.

"No?"

"There were remarkable machines then."

He rested one hand gently upon the modern controller.

"The difference is that today everyone is allowed to understand how they work."

The workshop fell comfortably quiet again as machines continued their careful movements beneath the afternoon sunlight, each cut bringing together old engineering, new software and the patient craftsmanship of people who measured progress not by who owned knowledge, but by how widely it could be shared.

The following morning they left North Bridge before sunrise, carrying fresh copies of several workshop control programs together with updated engineering software Martin insisted they take. The road climbed steadily into the mountains, winding between granite cliffs where waterfalls descended hundreds of meters before vanishing into deep forests below. Spruce and fir trees crowded the slopes, their branches forming a dark green canopy that occasionally opened to reveal distant snow still clinging to the highest peaks. The air grew noticeably cooler with every kilometer, and by midday even Jonas wrapped another wool blanket across his shoulders while guiding the horses through narrow mountain passes.

Helena's map proved remarkably accurate. Shortly after noon Otto pointed toward a rocky hillside almost completely hidden behind decades of forest growth.

"There."

At first Elias saw nothing.

Then, beneath tangled vines and moss-covered stone, straight concrete walls gradually emerged from the mountainside. What had once been an access road now resembled little more than a forest path, while enormous pines had rooted themselves through cracked retaining walls. A steel ventilation tower protruded above the treetops, its weathered paint barely visible beneath climbing ivy.

"The landslide buried almost half of it," Nora observed.

"And probably protected the rest," Otto replied.

The main entrance stood partially collapsed, but a smaller service tunnel remained open where the surveyors had evidently entered months earlier. Flashlights illuminated damp concrete corridors stretching deep beneath the mountain. Unlike Blackstone, the research station possessed almost no broken windows, because almost everything lay underground. Thick steel blast doors divided one section from another, while faded signs still pointed toward laboratories, archives, machine rooms and electrical facilities.

Dust covered every floor, yet little else had disturbed the silence.

Emergency lighting fixtures still hung from the ceilings.

Laboratory benches remained neatly arranged.

Rows of computers stood quietly beneath protective covers.

One office contained mugs, notebooks and coats hanging exactly where their owners had left them thirty-two years earlier.

No one spoke louder than necessary.

The building itself encouraged quiet voices.

Several corridors deeper they reached the central archive.

Heavy steel shelves stretched from floor to ceiling, filled with waterproof storage boxes whose seals had preserved their contents almost perfectly. Elias carefully opened the first container. Technical journals, research reports, materials testing records. She looked toward Elias.

"Green Valley will want copies of all this."

Otto had already begun photographing each shelf before anyone removed a single document.

"We disturb as little as possible."

Jonas nodded.

"If we collect now, everyone after us will thank us."

Several hours passed quietly. Engineering drawings disappeared into protective tubes. Digital archives were copied from solid-state drives that had miraculously survived beneath stable underground temperatures. Paper records were carefully wrapped inside waterproof sleeves before being packed into wooden transport cases.

Near the rear of the archive Elias discovered a small office unlike the others. Its nameplate had fallen from the door. Inside stood only one desk, one drafting table and a single narrow bookshelf. The room felt personal. Not abandoned. Personal. A mechanical pencil still rested across an unfinished drawing. Several mugs stood neatly washed upon a shelf. Someone had even left a wool sweater folded across the back of a chair before never returning.

The desk drawers opened smoothly. Inside lay six cloth-bound notebooks. Every volume carried the same handwritten initials.

A. K.

Otto carefully lifted the first notebook. The pages contained no official reports. Instead they recorded decades of practical observations.

*"Bearing number 17 failed after 4,800 hours. I suspect the lubrication channel should be widened by half a millimeter."*

Another page.

*"The computer simulation predicts failure. The machine disagrees. Trust the machine until the simulation learns why."*

Another.

*"Never design anything that cannot be repaired with ordinary tools. Cleverness is temporary. Maintenance lasts forever."*

Elias smiled quietly.

"I would have liked him."

Otto nodded.

"So would I."

Another notebook contained sketches of workshop layouts designed specifically so mechanics could reach every major component without dismantling half the machine first. Another discussed open engineering standards allowing independent workshops to manufacture interchangeable parts.

Nora leafed through several pages.

"He wasn't writing for management."

"No."

Otto smiled faintly.

"He was writing for whoever repaired the machines after him."

They packed the notebooks with particular care. The mountain remained silent outside. Then came a sudden gunshot. Concrete shattered beside the archive entrance.

"Cover!"

Elias instinctively pushed Nora behind a heavy steel cabinet while Jonas extinguished two lanterns, leaving only their flashlights illuminating the corridor.

Voices echoed through the tunnel.

"There!"

"They're stealing government property!"

Otto sighed quietly.

"Another collection of ghosts."

Five armed figures advanced cautiously down the corridor wearing mismatched remnants of old police equipment, patched tactical vests and faded camouflage clothing. One still carried a cracked riot shield painted with an almost unrecognizable government emblem.

Elias studied the corridor quickly.

"Narrow."

"No room to flank."

Jonas nodded.

"They have to come to us."

Another rifle shot struck sparks from the steel doorway. Elias answered with a single blast from the shotgun. Buckshot smashed into the concrete wall directly beside the lead attacker's head. Stone fragments tore across his face and neck, sending him crashing backward onto another gunman behind him.

The remaining attackers hesitated. That moment was enough. Jonas leaned around the archive shelves and fired two controlled pistol shots. The first struck one extremist through the upper arm, spinning him sideways as blood sprayed across the corridor wall. His rifle clattered uselessly across the concrete floor. The second round shattered another man's knee, dropping him immediately before he could raise his weapon again.

The narrow passage filled with echoes.

Someone farther back shouted desperately,

"Push forward!"

Nobody moved.

Elias advanced three careful steps before another rifle appeared around the corner. The shotgun roared again. The blast caught the attacker across the chest and shoulder at close range, throwing him violently against the corridor wall where he slid to the floor, leaving a dark trail across the faded concrete.

The last two extremists broke.

"Fall back!"

One disappeared deeper into the complex while another fired wildly over his shoulder. The bullets struck ceiling pipes, showering the passage with dust and fragments of insulation before he vanished into darkness after the others. Elias did not pursue.

"They know the tunnels."

"And we have what we came for."

Jonas quickly recovered several dropped rifles, removing their bolts before tossing the useless weapons aside.

Otto closed the final archive case.

"We leave."

Within minutes they emerged once more into cool mountain air carrying far more knowledge than equipment. The forest swallowed the hidden research station behind them almost immediately, as though the mountain preferred keeping its secrets until patient people arrived again.

The journey home passed peacefully.

Every village welcomed them with the same quiet curiosity that had greeted their return from Blackstone. Engineers carefully accepted copies of technical drawings. Librarians immediately began scanning every notebook. Programmers recovered software from the rescued storage drives while doctors examined decades of forgotten medical research. No single settlement attempted to keep everything. Each specialized according to its own strengths before producing additional copies for everyone else.

Several weeks later Elias sat outside his workshop repairing an irrigation pump while the familiar portable radio rested beside him.

"...today's engineering bulletin..."

The announcer's calm voice drifted across the valley.

"Glass Lake reports successful reproduction of several precision measuring instruments based upon documents recovered from the northern research station."

Another page rustled.

"Green Valley Medicine has completed laboratory verification of two improved vaccine refrigeration methods described in the recovered notebooks."

The next announcement followed naturally.

"North Bridge Computing Works has incorporated several machine-control algorithms from the archive into the latest workshop software. Updated copies will begin circulating through merchants next month."

Children laughed somewhere beyond the workshop fence. A merchant's wagon rolled slowly past carrying newly printed engineering manuals whose covers still smelled of fresh ink. Across the road another mechanic stopped to admire Elias' repaired generator before continuing toward the neighboring valley. Life resumed its ordinary rhythm almost immediately. Fields still needed harvesting. Engines still required maintenance. Bridges still wore with time. Children still learned their letters beside warm fireplaces during winter evenings.

Yet quietly, almost unnoticed, thousands of workshops, laboratories, libraries and schools throughout the country had each become slightly wiser than they had been only a month before. Knowledge that had nearly vanished beneath abandoned factories and forgotten mountains now travelled once again along peaceful roads, carried by merchants, mechanics, doctors, programmers and ordinary people whose greatest satisfaction remained exactly what it had always been—building something useful, improving it carefully, and passing it forward to the next pair of willing hands.

Several peaceful weeks passed before another journey presented itself. Autumn had begun touching the forests with pale gold and copper, while cool mornings filled the valleys with drifting mist that slowly dissolved beneath the strengthening sun. Elias spent those weeks exactly as he preferred, repairing harvest machinery, rebuilding worn irrigation pumps, helping neighboring workshops improve several bearing housings copied from the Blackstone drawings, and occasionally sitting outside his workshop with a cup of coffee while reading the notebooks rescued from the mountain research station. One evening Otto arrived carrying three weathered journals wrapped carefully inside oilcloth.

"I think we've overlooked something."

Elias looked up from his workbench.

"What is it?"

"The initials."

"A. K.?"

Otto nodded.

"They appear somewhere else."

He spread several copied pages across the table. Handwriting from the research station matched notes recovered inside Machine Shop Three almost perfectly.

"The same engineer?"

"I believe so."

Jonas, who had arrived only minutes earlier, unfolded another collection of copied documents.

"And I found another reference while delivering books."

He pointed toward a faded engineering bulletin.

"North Forge."

Otto smiled.

"I'd almost forgotten that place."

Three days later they headed north once more. Nora joined them without hesitation after arranging another temporary replacement at Green Valley Medicine. The familiar wagon rolled through valleys already busy with harvest wagons, smoke rising peacefully from chimneys as families prepared firewood for winter. The farther north they travelled, the more frequently they encountered engineering settlements. Water-powered machine shops stood beside cold mountain rivers, while compact foundries produced castings

destined for workshops hundreds of kilometers away. Small locomotives pulled freight wagons between nearby valleys where rebuilt railways had quietly returned to useful service.

North Forge appeared beneath towering granite cliffs, its broad workshops surrounding a fast-moving river that supplied enormous water turbines. The settlement specialized almost entirely in heavy machinery. Great castings cooled beside foundries while gigantic planers, milling machines and presses occupied workshops whose brick walls vibrated gently beneath the steady rhythm of productive work.

Their arrival caused little excitement. Engineers greeted engineers. Mechanics greeted mechanics. The conversation immediately turned toward bearings, machine alignments and cutting tool materials. An elderly archivist named Robertsen listened quietly while Otto described the initials A. K.

Without speaking he disappeared into a back room. Several minutes later he returned carrying an enormous leather-bound map portfolio.

"I've been wondering whether someone would eventually ask."

He carefully opened one brittle map after another. Old railway surveys, geological studies, factory construction plans. Finally he produced a hand-drawn maintenance map unlike the others.

"This puzzled me for years."

Faint pencil marks covered the margins. Not measurements. Notes. Symbols. Small geometric figures. Elias leaned closer.

"They're not random."

"No."

Otto adjusted his spectacles.

"They're engineering references."

The four of them spent nearly the entire afternoon decoding what first appeared meaningless. A triangle corresponded to hydraulic pressure. A square represented machine foundations. Small circles identified underground ventilation shafts. Several handwritten calculations, once interpreted correctly, produced precise compass bearings.

Jonas suddenly looked up.

"It isn't one map."

Everyone looked toward him.

"It's three."

He placed transparent drafting paper across the original.

"The research station."

He marked one point.

"Blackstone."

A second point.

Then the final measurements intersected deep beneath a mountain valley northwest of North Forge.

Silence settled over the room.

Otto smiled slowly.

"He hid it."

Two mornings later they reached the valley.

Unlike the previous research station, almost nothing suggested human construction. Dense forest covered every slope while fallen rocks concealed what had once been a narrow access road. Only after several hours of careful searching did Nora discover a weathered steel ventilation pipe emerging almost invisibly between moss-covered boulders.

"There."

The entrance itself lay beneath a collapsed timber shed hidden beneath decades of vegetation. Heavy steel doors remained closed. Remarkably, they still opened. The mechanisms groaned only slightly after Elias applied fresh lubricant from his tool kit. Cold air drifted upward from the darkness.

Electric cables still disappeared into the tunnel walls. Far below, emergency lighting had once existed, though now only their flashlights illuminated the long descent. The underground workshop exceeded every expectation. It stretched through multiple caverns excavated directly into solid granite. Precision machine tools stood beneath protective covers exactly where they had last been used. Dust covered every surface, yet rust appeared almost nowhere. Powerful ventilation systems had preserved the dry atmosphere remarkably well. Lathes, horizontal boring mills, gear cutting machines. Every workshop bench remained organized. Tools hung neatly from shadow boards. Measuring instruments rested inside velvet-lined drawers. Nothing suggested panic or abandonment. Only quiet departure.

Near the center of the main hall stood machines unlike any Elias had ever seen. One compact engine combined diesel efficiency with electrical generation inside a single modular unit. Another machine appeared capable of manufacturing remarkably complex gears almost automatically. Nearby rested experimental robotic handling equipment designed to move heavy castings with extraordinary precision. Otto slowly removed his hat.

"He was decades ahead."

Nora wandered into another laboratory.

"Batteries."

Rows of prototype energy storage systems lined one wall beside detailed laboratory notebooks explaining every experiment. Jonas opened another cabinet. Computer controllers, circuit boards, mechanical drawings. Everything catalogued. Everything carefully labelled. At the rear of the complex stood a modest office overlooking the workshops through thick glass windows. Its shelves contained only journals. Dozens of them. Every volume bore the same initials.

A. K.

Elias opened the first. The mystery disappeared almost immediately.

"My name is Aleksander Kals."

Otto quietly nodded.

"So we finally meet."

The journals described an extraordinary life.

Aleksander had supervised precision machinery at Blackstone during the final years before the Reckoning. When the old order began collapsing, he quietly transferred decades of engineering work into the hidden research station while simultaneously constructing this underground workshop beyond public knowledge. His intention appeared throughout every notebook.

*"Governments eventually claim every successful invention. Workshops never do. Therefore these machines must survive governments, not serve them."*

Another entry described Blackstone.

*"The factory builds today's machines."*

Another described the research station.

*"The laboratories improve tomorrow's knowledge."*

Finally, beneath a carefully drawn sketch of the underground workshop, Aleksander had written:

*"Here we build what comes after tomorrow."*

Otto closed the journal slowly.

"He planned all three."

For nearly a week they worked carefully through the underground complex. Nothing was rushed. Nothing dismantled carelessly. Instead they catalogued

every machine before selecting only those tools impossible to reproduce elsewhere. Precision gauges, master measuring blocks, diamond cutting tools, optical alignment equipment, prototype electronic controllers, engineering journals, machine drawings.

Everything else remained exactly where Aleksander had left it.

"We'll return properly."

Otto said quietly while fastening another crate.

"This deserves months."

Jonas secured the final cargo beneath thick canvas covers. The wagons rolled slowly away from the hidden valley beneath cool autumn skies. They had travelled scarcely five kilometers before several figures emerged shakily from the roadside trees. Not soldiers. Old men. Five altogether.

Their clothing consisted of faded government uniforms patched together with blankets and worn leather. One leaned heavily upon a walking stick fashioned from a broken rifle stock. Another limped badly, dragging one leg behind him. A third held nothing more threatening than a large kitchen knife whose blade had been sharpened repeatedly until almost no width remained.

Their leader stepped forward.

His beard reached almost to his stomach.

"You stop."

Jonas quietly halted the horses.

The old man pointed weakly toward the covered wagons.

"Government property."

Otto sighed almost sadly.

"There isn't any government."

"There is!"

the old man shouted.

"We're the administration."

Another nodded eagerly.

"The elite."

"You need permits."

"Orders must be followed."

The limping man raised one trembling finger.

"Everything belongs to the state."

"It is illegal to remove those machines."

Elias looked calmly at the five exhausted figures.

"The state ended more than thirty years ago."

"No!"

the leader cried.

"It still exists."

"In us."

"We're authorized."

He pointed the knife awkwardly toward the wagons.

"Unload everything."

Jonas spoke quietly.

"No."

The old man's face twisted with anger.

"You will obey."

"We gave orders!"

"You must always obey orders!"

He stumbled forward raising the knife. The limping man drew an ancient revolver whose cylinder barely turned. Another reached clumsily for a rusted shotgun.

Elias moved first. One controlled shotgun blast struck the armed man before he could raise the weapon fully. He collapsed instantly into the roadside grass. Jonas fired once. The revolver flew from the limping attacker's hand as the bullet shattered his forearm. He cried out, fell heavily against a tree and slid silently to the ground. The leader continued stumbling forward despite everything, shouting incoherently about ministers, decrees and illegal property seizures.

Nora drew her revolver. One shot. The old man stopped abruptly before falling backward among the fallen leaves. The remaining two stared for only a heartbeat before reaching for their own weapons. Otto quietly shook his head.

"Please don't."

They ignored him. Two quick pistol shots from Jonas ended the confrontation before either man managed to fire. Silence returned to the forest. Only the

horses shifted uneasily. Nobody spoke for several moments. Finally Otto looked toward the fallen men.

"They never left."

"No," Elias answered quietly.

"They only ran out of time."

Jonas removed the remaining ammunition from the scattered weapons before placing them beside the bodies. The wagons continued south. Several days later familiar roads welcomed them home once again.

Copies of Aleksander Kals' journals began spreading from workshop to workshop, just as the Blackstone drawings and research station archives had before them. Engineers gathered around workbenches late into the evenings discussing prototype machines decades ahead of their time. Programmers translated forgotten control systems into modern software. Machine builders studied new bearing arrangements and modular engine designs. Medical researchers examined battery systems capable of powering remote clinics for weeks without interruption.

Elias unlocked the familiar doors of his workshop as evening settled across the valley. The old diesel generator still hummed steadily outside. His repaired machines waited patiently beneath the awning. Letters rested upon the workbench. The portable radio crackled softly beside a cooling cup of coffee.

The roads had carried him far beyond his own valley once again, yet they had brought him home exactly as they always did, to a quiet workshop where another engine already waited for repair, another traveller would soon arrive with news from distant settlements, and another forgotten piece of knowledge would someday find its way into the hands of people ready to build something even better than before.

## Home

The months that followed spread quietly across the countryside like another season rather than a great historical event. No single workshop transformed the nation overnight. Instead, improvements appeared one valley at a time. A bearing design copied in Glass Lake reached North Forge through merchants. An improved spindle from North Forge found its way into Copper Hill. Workshop control software written in North Bridge was refined by programmers hundreds of kilometers away before returning stronger than before. Green Valley Medicine adopted the battery systems described in Aleksander Kals' journals, allowing mobile clinics to preserve medicines for

weeks while traveling between distant settlements. The prototype hydraulic systems from the underground workshop inspired compact forestry machines capable of climbing mountain slopes where older equipment had always struggled. Every settlement added something of its own before sending the improved drawings onward again.

Machine builders often remarked that nobody could remember who had made the latest improvement, and nobody seemed particularly interested in finding out. One engineer solved a vibration problem, another redesigned a gear train, a third discovered stronger alloys for bearing cages, while a fourth quietly rewrote the control software until the entire machine worked more smoothly than before. The names rarely remained attached to the designs. The machines themselves travelled farther than their creators ever did.

One crisp autumn morning Elias sat inside his workshop machining a replacement shaft for grain cleaner while the familiar portable radio rested beside the lathe. The little receiver crackled briefly before the announcer's calm voice emerged.

"Good morning from Valley Voice Radio."

Soft violin music played between the announcements.

"Our engineering report begins with encouraging news from North Bridge. The latest workshop controller based partly upon the recovered Kals archives has now been installed in one hundred and forty-three machine shops throughout the country."

Another page turned.

"Glass Lake Optical Works reports successful completion of improved coordinate measuring instruments using precision bearing arrangements first reproduced from the Blackstone drawings."

The announcer continued without changing tone.

"Green Valley Medicine has completed production of another portable refrigeration system allowing travelling medical teams to preserve temperature-sensitive medicines for nearly three weeks without fixed electrical supply."

Another report followed.

"North Forge engineers have successfully tested the modular diesel-electric generator described in the Kals journals. Construction drawings are now available through merchants and community libraries."

The radio paused while a local choir performed an old harvest song recorded during the previous week's festival. When the music faded, the familiar closing words returned.

"If your workshop improves any published design, please forward your revisions through your nearest merchant or community library so others may benefit."

Elias smiled quietly. Nora looked up from the workbench where she was calibrating several portable medical refrigerators.

"People are working freely and it benefits all."

The seasons continued turning. The vineyards harvested their grapes, orchards filled their storage houses with apples and pears, forests glowed with brilliant autumn colors before gradually surrendering their leaves to the cool winds. Somewhere during those peaceful weeks, almost without either of them planning it, Nora simply stopped preparing to leave.

At first her medicine satchel remained packed beside the front door. Then several medical books appeared upon one shelf. A few days later another shelf filled with laboratory notebooks. Soon afterward her travelling coat hung comfortably beside Elias' heavy leather workshop coat. One evening she returned from Green Valley carrying two wooden crates.

"I've brought the rest."

Elias looked toward them.

"The rest?"

"My books."

He nodded once.

"Then we'll need another bookshelf."

She smiled.

"I was hoping you'd say that."

Nothing more formal happened. No ceremony. No vows. No rings. Friends simply began referring to the workshop as Elias and Nora's place. Nobody questioned it. The arrangement suited them perfectly.

By late October the mornings carried the first hint of approaching winter. Frost covered the grass until sunlight slowly melted it away, while smoke curled peacefully from chimneys throughout the valley. Elias spent one cool afternoon helping his elderly neighbor repair a compact diesel tractor whose hydraulic lift had begun leaking during the final days of harvest.

The machine stood beneath an open shed while the old farmer handed tools across without ever needing to ask which one Elias required.

"The seal?"

"Worn."

"I thought so."

"It has done twenty years."

"Then it has earned retirement."

The farmer laughed.

"I wish my knees worked that way."

Nearby Nora had unfolded a small table beneath the shade of an apple tree. Villagers wandered over throughout the afternoon carrying medicine bottles requiring replacement labels, small refrigerators needing inspection, or simply questions about cough remedies before winter arrived. She examined each patiently, replacing worn seals, checking expiration dates and carefully organizing fresh supplies inside neatly labelled wooden boxes. A young mother arrived carrying her son's asthma inhaler.

"Does this still look alright?"

Nora inspected it carefully.

"It does."

She handed it back together with a spare.

"Keep this one as well."

"You don't have to."

"I know."

The woman smiled warmly.

"I'll send fresh honey next week."

"We'll enjoy it."

Only a few meters away Elias tightened the final hydraulic fitting before climbing down from the tractor.

"Try it."

The old farmer started the engine.

The hydraulic arms rose smoothly.

"So they remembered how."

"They never forgot."

The farmer climbed down and shook Elias' hand.

"I've got fresh potatoes."

"You don't need to pay immediately."

"I wasn't asking."

By evening a sack of potatoes, two smoked trout and several jars of blackberry preserves rested beside the workshop door. Life possessed its own comfortable balance.

The last warm afternoon before winter truly arrived found Elias and Nora walking toward the river carrying little more than fishing rods, a thick wool blanket and a large wicker picnic basket. The river flowed quietly beneath tall birch trees whose golden leaves drifted lazily across the water. A kingfisher flashed brilliant blue above the surface before disappearing downstream, while somewhere deeper in the forest a woodpecker continued tapping steadily against an old oak.

They found their favorite place beneath an old willow whose branches leaned almost to the water. Elias cast the first fishing line while Nora spread the blanket across soft grass warmed gently by the afternoon sun. The basket held enough food for what Jonas would undoubtedly have called an unreasonable feast.

Thin slices of smoked ham rested beside freshly baked rye bread still carrying the fragrance of the village bakery. Bright red tomatoes picked that very morning lay beside crisp marinated pickles seasoned with dill and garlic. A wheel of blue mold cheese from Willow Crossing shared space with creamy goat cheese wrapped in grape leaves. Thick slices of smoked pork sausage flavored with juniper berries rested beside cured venison, small roasted chicken, herb butter, boiled eggs sprinkled with coarse salt, smoked river trout, pickled mushrooms gathered from autumn forests, fresh cucumbers, black olives traded from the southern valleys and jars of forest honey whose golden color caught the afternoon sunlight.

There were apples from Edgar's orchard, ripe pears, dark grapes, wild strawberries preserved in their own syrup and warm apple pie carefully wrapped in linen to keep it fresh. Two bottles completed the meal, one filled with sparkling apple cider from a nearby orchard and another containing cool spring water collected high in the mountains during their last journey.

"I think Jonas packed this basket."

Nora laughed.

"If he had, there would be twice as much."

They ate slowly, never feeling obliged to hurry toward anything. Occasionally one of them reeled in a trout before returning to conversation about some newly repaired machine, an interesting medical journal or a letter recently delivered by travelling merchants. Between them rested the familiar portable radio whose antenna leaned lazily against the picnic basket.

The announcer's voice drifted softly across the quiet river.

"…today we welcome another engineering workshop opening near Stone River. Construction has begun using several modular machine designs first described in the Kals journals. Local machinists report excellent progress and hope to begin producing precision agricultural equipment before spring planting."

A pause. Another page turned.

"The first apprentices have already arrived."

Elias looked across the river where sunlight shimmered upon the gently moving water.

"Someone else has started."

Nora followed his gaze.

"They'll improve it."

"So will someone after them."

The radio returned to music, a quiet violin accompanied by guitar and accordion, while the autumn breeze carried the scent of fallen leaves through the valley. Somewhere beyond the forests another engineer adjusted a drawing beneath the light of a workshop lamp. Somewhere else a programmer rewrote another section of machine-control software. A doctor unpacked newly delivered medicines. A carpenter shaped oak into another table destined to outlive its maker. A merchant harnessed horses before dawn. A child opened an engineering book rescued from the old world. A machinist measured steel with patient hands before making the first careful cut.

Beside the quiet river Elias and Nora remained beneath the willow until the first evening stars appeared above the valley. The workshop would wait until morning. The roads would always lead somewhere new. More forgotten knowledge might yet sleep beneath forests, mountains or abandoned factories. But for that peaceful evening there was only the gentle current, the fading warmth of the autumn sun, good food shared without hurry, the quiet crackle of a little battery-powered radio, and a countryside where ordinary people continued building, repairing, learning and living, one honest day after another, into a future that remained open to whatever careful hands chose to create next.